

Contentious Ethics

Creativity and Persuasion Among Environmental Organizers in South India

by

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Dedication

For Sharat and Zabna

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One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that the path of a human life is drawn neither by social fate nor by force of will, but by a heterogeneous slew of pushes and pulls arising from the interaction of a self with its many others, human and otherwise. My path during the last decade of graduate study—through all its meanderings, its slow climbs, and its headlong sprints—is surely case in point. At every step, I have been guided, coaxed, and driven along by others, whether through advice or inspiration, encouragement or provocation, obstacles or opportunities, prayers or bets. In deference to convention, I limit the record here to just a few of those who have most directly impacted this manuscript.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures.....	ix
Abstract.....	x
Chapter 1: Changing Oneself, Changing Others	1
1.1 Ordinary Anxieties	1
1.2 Practices of Freedom Among Other Forces	5
1.3 Ethics and Politics in Kerala's People's Struggles	12
1.4 Locating People's Struggles in Kerala Political Culture	15
1.5 <i>Kēraḷīyam</i> Magazine	26
1.6 The Gandhamur Action Council	35
1.7 Methods	40
1.8 From Freedom and Unfreedom to Creativity and Persuasion.....	45
Chapter 2: Scales of Value	58
2.1 Making Insiders and Outsiders.....	58
2.2 Insiders and Outsiders in Kerala's People's Struggles.....	62
2.3 Consciousness and Cause.....	68
2.4 For the <i>Nāṭ</i>	73
2.5 Same Goal, Different Causes	78
2.6 The Shape of Space	82
Chapter 3: Typing People's Struggles.....	85
3.1 A Categorical Refusal	85
3.2 People's Struggle Type 1: Ink and Paper.....	89
3.3 People's Struggle Type 2: Iconicities of Ethical Stance	99
3.4 People's Struggle Type 3: Modes and Tactics of Political Action	116
3.5 Circuits of Motivation	122
3.6 A People's Struggle Movement?.....	127
Chapter 4: Public Roads	132
4.1 Thoroughfare.....	132

4.2 Events in the Road.....	137
4.3 Channeling Publicity	144
4.4 Staging the people	156
4.5 Talking openly, talking in the open.....	164
Chapter 5: Sticky Ethics.....	171
5.1 On the Road to Environmental Change.....	171
5.2 How to Spot a Moral Happening.....	174
5.3 Was that Ethics? Authority and Reasons in Evaluation	178
5.4 Sticky Ethics.....	187
5.5 What Makes Ethicalizations Persist?	195
5.6 A Barbed Affordance	199
Chapter 6: Consistency and Compromise	204
6.1 Out of Place	204
6.2 VapoRub to Tea: Radical Living and the Ethical Evaluation of Ordinary Things	208
6.3 Making Tea Drinking Bad.....	210
6.4 Integration, Personalization, and Inconsistency	213
6.5 Inconsistent or Out of Place: Problems with Alignment.....	220
6.6 Standing Fast.....	224
6.7 Consistency and Cosmology	229
6.8 Compromise and Community	233
6.9 Living in Common	235
6.10 Activists Against the World, Activists in the World.....	240
Chapter 7: The Smell of Injustice.....	247
7.1 Evidence, evidence everywhere	247
7.2 The smell of injustice	252
7.3 “That’s what you say”	259
7.4 People’s Science.....	269
7.5 Two stories about injustice.....	277
Chapter 8: Becoming an Activist.....	285
8.1 Trapped.....	285
8.2 Activist ethics as one possibility	288
8.3 Dialogic shifts	291
8.4 Ethics without contention.....	300
Bibliography	307
Appendix.....	321

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Kerala.....	17
Figure 2: : Map of "people's struggles" from <i>Kēraḷīyam</i> magazine (8/2012).....	64
Figure 3: "Organizer's Contact Intensity and Influence" (Rivera & Erlich, 1992, p. 11).....	66
Figure 4: Diagram of shifting meaning of "nāṭ"	75
Figure 5: DuBois' Stance Triangle (2007, p. 163)	109
Figure 6: Circuits of motivation in the typification of people's struggles	125
Figure 7: Photo and sketch of Mohandas' analysis of alienation	211
Figure 8: Distribution of subjects of debitive ("should") or potential ("can") verbs in Hari's speech.....	216

Abstract

What makes a person take up a cause? This ethnographic study of environmental and social activists in Kerala, India examines how they commit themselves to normative visions for social transformation and how they attempt to persuade others to take up these causes as well. Through thick description of the causal forces at play in these processes, I attempt to push beyond the binary between freedom and determinism in ethical life.

This study is based on thirty-two months of fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2014 with activists in Kerala's "people's struggles," a mode of grassroots community organizing primarily concerned with the impacts of industrial pollution, land rights, and other environmental conflicts. Fieldwork focused on two groups of activists as they collaborated on a campaign to stop pollution from a suburban gelatin factory. The first group was a local action council formed by nearby residents to protest the health effects of the factory's emissions. The second group was a network of environmentalists who supported such campaigns as part of a broader effort at radically transforming environmental values. Making use of archival data, recordings of face-to-face interaction, participant observation, and interviews, the study follows activists as they transformed their own ethical lives—learning protest songs, going to marches instead of going to work, or giving up tea and Western medicine—and also as they attempted to persuade others with magazine articles, roadside speeches, and guided tours of pollution.

This dissertation challenges dominant accounts of purpose and agency in literatures on social movements, community organizing, and the anthropology of ethics. Drawing on moral philosophy and the linguistic anthropology of stance, I trace relations of influence from evaluating subject to evaluated object, object to subject, and between subjects. I show that the causes of people’s struggle activists are best understood not as functions of predetermined interests, nor as the creations of radically free subjects, but as products of activists’ interactions with social others and a value-laden world. Describing the entanglements of changing oneself and changing others in people’s struggle activism, I argue for the importance of various “unfreedoms” in even the most strategic, norm-contesting ethical projects.

Chapter 1: Changing Oneself, Changing Others

1.1 Ordinary Anxieties

Dinner went late that night. We were celebrating the departure of Sunil, my research assistant, and I had brought home a feast of takeout: chicken, fish, mussels, fried rice, and various sweet treats. Long after we had all eaten our fill, we sat together on the tile floor, cross-legged or propped on our wrists among the greasy plates and half-empty cartons, talking.

Sunil and I had been living with Adarsh, Faiza, and their daughter for almost a year, he playing the adopted anthropologist as much as I.¹ Indeed, Sunil arguably played the role better because he played it more quietly, being less quick than I to stake out his own positions in this activist household's many debates. Adarsh and Faiza were part of a network of environmental and social activists involved in Kerala's "people's struggles," *janakīya samaraṇṇa!*, a mode of grassroots community organizing primarily concerned with the impacts of industrial pollution, land rights, and other environmental conflicts. We regularly received visitors with strong opinions, and a couple of our most frequent guests were with us that night, as well as Faiza's father and sister, who were never shy of speaking their minds. Over time, we had come to recognize that Sunil, a devout Muslim, had some strong opinions of his own. But whether because of his dedication to his role as researcher or because of his relative youth, he tended to

¹ In order to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for people and some place names and geographic markers. For people, pseudonyms are selected to approximate the caste and religious associations of the actual name. Exceptions are made for those who expressly requested to have their real names used.

keep his views to himself. Perhaps for this reason, now that he was on the verge of saying goodbye, everyone had questions for him.

What was Sunil's first impression of me? Of Adarsh and Faiza? In his opinion, what were our bad traits? The more he hedged and demurred, the more provocative our questions became.

"And what about that night during Ramadan when John ate the food we put out for you?" Adarsh quipped, "How did that feel?"²

"If that food helped to end John's hunger, then I am content," said Sunil with a mischievous smile. Adarsh howled and laughter erupted all around.

Finally, after much thought, I asked Sunil a more serious question: When, during all of our experiences together, had he been most afraid? He took a long pause before answering, casting a meaningful look in my direction, as if he knew what I expected he would say. But the story he told was not what I would have guessed at all.

Sunil told about a day when he had purchased some vegetables on his way home. Faiza did nearly all of the cooking for our house, with occasional help from Adarsh, so Sunil and I considered it our part to contribute to the raw materials, so to speak. That day he carried three plastic bags of produce across the soccer ground that lay between the vegetable shop and our house. But as he got closer, he began to get anxious about how Faiza might react if he returned with these three big plastic bags. Not just anxious, he said, but afraid. He put everything down and carefully packed all of the vegetables into just two bags. Then he threw the other bag into a small water reservoir next to the soccer field, a place used by many of our neighbors as a makeshift landfill.

² This unfortunate incident was the result of a misunderstanding of the meaning of a plate of food left on the kitchen counter at night. For discussion of the capacity of gifts to "become lost to those whom they would serve," see Keane, 1997, p. 91-93.

When Faiza heard this story, she laughed. She teased Sunil for worrying so much about such a little thing. What, she asked, could he have possibly thought she would *do* to him? Her sister needled Sunil for finding Faiza so terrifying. Everyone laughed, and I laughed too, but not in quite the same way as the others. I laughed because, over the course of five years studying people's struggle activists in Kerala, I had been in that kind of situation so many times before—slipping into the bathroom to take my allergy medicine or looking over my shoulder as I ducked into an ice cream store. I laughed because I knew the "fear" Sunil was talking about. I laughed at the ridiculous things living alongside environmental activists had made me do.

The reader may well find it puzzling how such ordinary things (e.g., one among the millions of polyethylene bags that daily convey purchased goods to Kerala homes) could be the source of so much anxiety. One part of this puzzle is the question of how ethical value can be rescaled such that ordinary, usually unremarkable acts become subject to intense evaluation and reform. To be clear, this was not a puzzling matter for Faiza, Adarsh, or the other activists with us that night; the smallness of plastic bags did not come into their jokes. To varying degrees, these activists took changes in the everyday habits of one's own life to be crucial levers for transforming the "broader" social world. Thus, they were often engaged in contesting the boundaries between the ethical and the nonethical, making seemingly unimportant aspects of life—like milk, soap, tea, or the alignment of one's stride—part of a larger normative project of social change. Within this scalar paradigm, bringing a few plastic bags from the vegetable market was seen as perpetuating, rather than challenging, an accumulation of plastic waste that was overflowing Kerala's landfills and sickening those who lived nearby. Indeed, several of Kerala's most prominent people's struggles were pitted against such landfills. Thus, Adarsh was careful to pack an empty fabric bag in his knapsack every morning just in case he needed to buy

anything on the way home. Plastic bags might be so pervasive as to seem ordinary, but this was the very reason they were so important.

But there is a second part to this puzzle, a part that Faiza, Adarsh, and their guests seemed to find puzzling as well. How could *Faiza's* concern with plastic bags have stirred such powerful emotion in *Sunil*? To be sure, she and Adarsh avoided using plastic themselves, and they were in support of a ban on plastic bags. But, like other environmentalists and people's struggle activists I studied, Faiza and Adarsh did not see themselves as forcing their views or their chosen way of life on others. Indeed, they considered the expansion of individual freedom to be a central aim of their efforts for social change. This was particularly true with regard to their efforts to reform their everyday lives; in working to change themselves, they were actively challenging widespread social norms that they saw as perpetuating social inequality and environmental degradation. These were practices of freedom. The notion that such practices could instill fear was incongruous, even ridiculous.

And yet, the anxiety Sunil felt about the plastic bag reflects a persistent aspect of our shared experience conducting participant observation among activists in people's struggles. We used to sneak off together sometimes, for a club soda or for lunch in an AC restaurant, and we would talk about our feelings of vigilance, apprehension, sometimes even fear. We knew that those we studied would have found our anxieties silly, and it was not that we were really worried that they would *do* anything to us. It was simply that we were aware that moral judgment was in play. We were not like these activists—we used plastic bags, took allergy medicine, and drank club soda—and we knew we would be found out. The supposed "smallness" of all these things only made this experience more oppressive. With so many ordinary things under moral scrutiny, how were we to know when we might stumble into ethical trouble? We were constantly on high

alert. Thus, the pervasive work of self-reform in which we were immersed felt anything but freeing. It made us worry about what would otherwise have been of no concern. It made us do what we would not otherwise have done. As for Faiza and Adarsh, the question of why these activists' work upon themselves had such effects on us was puzzling. But it was no joke.

1.2 Practices of Freedom Among Other Forces

How can living out one's vision of the good life bring about unfreedom in the lives of others? Many recent anthropological treatments of ethics have focused largely on the exercise of freedom (2012, pp. 91-93; Faubion, 2001; Heywood, 2015; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014b; Mahmood, 2005; Pandian, 2009). In an attempt to counter what some argue was an earlier over-emphasis on rules and obligations as the building blocks of moral order, anthropologists have described people who actively order their own lives in accordance with their values. These accounts of ethical freedom, like accounts of norms, tell a story about the social forces that drive the evaluative dimension of human life. But by framing ethics as either the work of society upon individuals or the work of the self upon itself, anthropologists give prominence to some forces over others, while failing to adequately attend to the interactions among them. Both stories make it difficult to understand how freedom and unfreedom can coincide.

What Sunil's predicament shows is that other stories could be told. Living out one's values may at times be largely a matter of following rules (Durkheim, 1961; Mahmood, 2005; Robbins, 2004), pursuing one's chosen vision of the good (Dave, 2012; Laidlaw, 2002), or both (Keane, 2010; Robbins, 2007). But it is also often about imposing one's own visions of the good upon others. This latter aspect of ethics is particularly evident among activists. Faiza and Adarsh, like the other activists I studied, engaged in a politics of moral transformation, seeking to change widely-held ethical values in order to bring about their vision for a better social world. They

were pursuing their chosen way of life, but changing others was integral to that way of life.

Those who lived alongside them, like myself, Sunil, and our neighbors, felt the pressure of Faiza and Adarsh's social change efforts even when those efforts were not directed at us.

The recent anthropology of ethics has not only described the exercise of freedom; it has also been a forum for the critique of freedom. In particular, anthropologists have been concerned to distinguish their conceptualizations of ethical freedom from liberal notions of individual autonomy as an ethical ideal. For example, James Laidlaw's proposal for an anthropology of ethics as the study of practices of freedom begins from an analysis of Jain ascetic practices, in which all desires are "enumerated, identified, repudiated, and extinguished" so as to achieve self-renunciation and, ultimately, the destruction of the self (Laidlaw, 2002). Laidlaw acknowledges that, insofar as such practices aim at destroying both desires and the desiring self, they may seem to run counter to prevalent notions of freedom. But he argues that because Jains' pursuit of self-destruction is generally undertaken as a "voluntary ethical project," it should be understood as a form of free self-cultivation (Laidlaw, 2002, p. 326). The criterion for whether a social practice is an ethical "practice of freedom," he argues, should not be made with reference to its endpoint, but rather with reference to the process through which it is pursued.

Like Laidlaw, Saba Mahmood develops a critique of ethical freedom from an account of practices that appear unfree from the perspective of liberal norms, but her argument against these norms is more radical. In an ethnography of a piety movement among Muslim women in Cairo, she challenges the applicability of any preconceived "procedural" notion of freedom to the work these women undertake in cultivating virtues such as fear of divine retribution, submission to religious authority, and obedience to one's husband (Mahmood, 2005). Mahmood finds resources for her analysis in Foucault's treatments of subjectivity as both "subjection" (French,

assujettissement), or the ways in which relations of power constitute subjects (Butler, 1997, p. 2; Foucault, 1978), and as "moral subjectivation," or the ways in which people take themselves to be ethical subjects accountable to moral codes (Foucault, 1990, pp. 27-29).³ She argues that these ideas pose a paradox in that the formation of the subject and its ability to act are "enabled and created by specific relations of subordination" (Mahmood, 2005). Viewed through this lens, the pursuit of obedience and submission by participants in piety movements is neither mere coercion nor "voluntary slavery" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 149). Rather, it is the basis for their ethical freedom as Muslim women.

Thus, Mahmood's argument leaves aside the fundamental voluntarism that Laidlaw retains. Nonetheless, both critiques of freedom share a common form; they both seek to recuperate some story of freedom from ethical lives that might, they acknowledge, seem profoundly unfree to the naive Western liberal observer. Importantly, in neither case does the author claim that the idea of freedom was important to those they studied. Indeed, in both cases, it would seem that the respective parties are mainly concerned with other ideas, other aims, the value of which justified subordination or even elimination of their desires and freedoms. And yet, stories about the free work of the self upon the self can be told even here.

Efforts by Faiza, Adarsh, and other Malayali⁴ activists to change the world by changing their own ethical orientations and everyday habits—to "be the change they wish to see in the

³ The continuity that Mahmood assumes across Foucault's work is a matter of some debate. While she calls both concepts "subjectivation," the prior concept, which appears to be Foucault's main concern in work prior to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* is generally glossed as "subjection." While Foucault retrospectively described an overarching concern with subjectivity across his work (e.g., Foucault, 1983), it is not clear that his various treatments of the topic cohere in one theory of subjectivation (Flynn, 1985; Kelly, 2013).

⁴ The people of the state of Kerala, India, in which this research was conducted, are usually referred to as Malayalis, after the state's dominant language of Malayalam.

world"⁵—make for a far more straightforward account of ethical freedom. Indeed, although the scalar perspectives that underpin these efforts have a clear South Asian pedigree (see Chapters 2 and 6), these activists quite often invoked liberal arguments for individual freedom in describing their own aims. And yet, as Sunil's anxieties about plastic bags illustrate, efforts to transform oneself can overflow the self, such that an exercise of freedom becomes also an imposition of pressure upon others. Indeed, even work upon oneself regarding apparently "small" matters can, at least in some cases, occasion heavy and unwanted pressure. Thus, rather than an account of how freedom can be recuperated from apparent unfreedom, here we see how even the explicit pursuit of freedom can engender unfreedom.

But my aim is not simply to recuperate unfreedom from freedom. Rather, insofar as the complexity of evaluative practices (whether intuitively liberating or not) consistently confounds the dichotomy between freedom and unfreedom, understanding the dynamics of causal influence in human ethics may require more subtle terms. Temporarily bracketing some of the contrasts that have dominated the anthropology of ethics—such as freedom/unfreedom, good/obligation, reflexivity/habit, choice/norm, and self/society—may be the best way of getting a handle on when and how these various factors make a difference in ethical lives. And this is particularly true, I would argue, for an adequate account the ethical projects of the activists described here, who pursue change of self and others in tandem. What is required is a survey of the forces, understood as broadly as possible, at play in efforts to bring about moral change.

⁵ Although it is not clear that Mohandas K. Gandhi ever said or wrote precisely these words, this aphorism is attributed to him on the T-shirts and coffee mugs of countless social work schools and service organizations around the world (Morton, 2011). The activists studied here were also familiar with this Gandhian "meme." Although consideration of such notions in Gandhi's own thought is beyond the scope of this study, the centrality of self-oriented change among these activists was clearly influenced by Gandhian organizing traditions.

Such a survey of forces offers a reframing for the study of ethical freedom. Freedom is a complex, multifarious, and highly normative notion that has been central not only to recent anthropological debates, but to Western social theory in the broadest possible sense. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to propose any new theory of freedom. What a survey of forces helps to highlight, however, is that freedom is fundamentally a causal concept. In Laidlaw's words, the question of ethical freedom has been understood as the question, "of whether or in what sense peoples' actions are unconstrained and really their actions" (Laidlaw, 2014b, p. 6). In other words, freedom can be understood as a relation between trajectories of force—between forces from the self and forces upon the self. Thus, to trace the multiple trajectories of causal influence that contribute to the ethical lives of activists is also to explore forms and degrees of freedom and unfreedom, but without presupposing that ethics itself is fundamentally free or unfree.

Relatedly, in both sociology and anthropology, the study of social movements and activism has received increased interest with a shift in emphasis (speaking here in the broadest terms) from social stability and reproduction to social change and, relatedly, from society and social norms to the discrete projects of particular social actors—what has been called a turn to "practice" (Ortner, 1984). In this context, the lives of those who transgress or work to change social norms became more than aberrations in the social order; they became, in effect, a site for exploring how social orders are disassembled and remade. To some extent, the activists I studied also understood themselves in the same way. However, particularly with regard to the shaping of ethical orientations, the agency of activists was often limited. With regard to work upon themselves, activists did cultivate their own ethical orientations, but they also described how they were affected by others (including other activists) or by the valences apparent to them in

their socio-material world. Likewise, in their efforts to persuade others, activists often sought to enroll material things—such as evidence of pollution—that could bolster their own efforts, but had difficulty controlling these things.

The emphasis on human freedom—and especially Foucauldian “autopoiesis,” or the work of the self upon the self (Faubion, 2001)—in the anthropology of ethics tracks closely with the broader “turn to practice” narrative described above and could even be thought of as late to the party in this respect. My chief contribution to this literature is to direct attention to how people exert influence or pressure on the ethical lives of others—arguably the quintessential activity of an activist ethics. On the one hand, I show that the problem with Durkheimian moral theory is not in his emphasis on social control, but in the way Durkheim imagined society. Seen through the lens of activist ethics, normative forces of social control are not from society above, but from “the people standing next to you.”⁶ On the other hand, I also show how ethical self-cultivation is not only influenced by moral pressure from others, but also exerts pressure upon others, even when those concerned claim to only be interested in changing themselves. Thus, the looping influence of selves upon themselves is just one stitch in a tightly woven web of agonistic and reinforcing forces.

In their efforts for social change, activists in Kerala's people's struggles engaged in contention over ethical judgements about right and wrong, good and bad, justice and injustice. They sought to creatively elaborate new values for themselves and persuade others to adopt new values and judgments as well. Both in changing themselves and in changing others, they exercised considerable agency, but they were not the only agents. People's struggle was an

⁶ I am grateful to Charles Zuckermann for suggesting this point.

interactive pursuit, in which activists sought to employ forces that they could not entirely control—for example, the forces of arguments and ideas, material evidence, TV newscasts, and bodily conflict in addition to the forces of kinship ties or self-discipline.

To be clear, my aim is not to describe the workings of a "force" manifest in various forms but ultimately unified, as in a certain galaxy far far away. I have selected the term "forces" only for its vagueness, seeking to begin the search for what matters to ethical life agnostically, without presuming any general picture. Chiefly, I do not wish to give privilege to any of the possible trajectories of influence between selves and their others. Thus, I take up the term "forces" here, at the outset, only in order to emphasize that the relevant trajectories may not only be those of freedom (self → self or self → other), nor unfreedom (others → self), nor the work of some upon others that is commonly called "activism." In what follows, I leave this general term aside in favor of the verbs that best describe any particular trajectory of influence, motivation, or compulsion.

In addition, I wish to leave open the relation between evaluating subject and evaluated object, allowing for the possibility that the work of evaluation is not all on either side. Activists took on new ethical orientations not merely by force of will, but because they felt inspired by exemplars and compelled by injustices in their social worlds. Their moral creativity was a practice of attunement, even obedience, to the ethical demands of a non-neutral reality. Moreover, insofar as to adopt new ethical orientations for oneself was also often to exert force upon the lives of others, persuasive force was already stirring in the creative process. The language of forces makes room for uncertainty about subject-object relations as well. However, as with self-other relations, the description of these relations will require more specific terms.

This dissertation explores the interplay of forces in the ethical lives of activists working

on Kerala's people's struggles. Efforts at avoiding plastic and other objectionable ordinary things form only one aspect of this activism—an aspect which some activists made central and others considered a distraction. But across all aspects of people's struggles, such as the campaign to shut down a polluting gelatin factory that forms a major site for this study, one can find the work of changing oneself and changing others in complex and mutually-supportive relation. By breaking with the concepts of freedom and unfreedom, we can better understand how multiple causal mechanisms converge and interact in the tandem projects of changing oneself and changing others and more fully appreciate how various trajectories of influence may be operant at once. We can also more effectively analyze how such projects mix ethics and politics.

1.3 Ethics and Politics in Kerala's People's Struggles

As Lambek points out, the recent turn to ethics in anthropology has been, in part, a turn away from "analyses that emphasize structure, power, and interest" (Lambek 2010, 1). One can see this same shift in the emphasis given to freedom and reflexivity in this literature; questions about what people live *for* only make sense insofar as their lives are not entirely determined by structures, powers, or interests. In analyzing activism as an ethical⁷ practice, I tread this same path. However, like others calling for attention to ethics, my aim is not to leave behind the analysis of structures, powers and interests, but to integrate the analysis of ethics and politics. Activist contention over ethical values offers an ideal site to take up this integrative work.

At first glance, it might seem that Kerala's people's struggles are better understood as an arena of political contention than of ethical contention. The local Action Council formed by

⁷ One source of confusion in scholarship on ethics is that the English adjectives “ethical” and “moral” share two common uses—to indicate what “has to do with” ethics or morality and to indicate what is of positive ethical or moral value. Throughout this manuscript, I will use these terms with exclusively with the prior meaning. To indicate what is positively valued by someone, I will use “good,” “right,” “just,” or other such less ambiguously normative terms.

residents to oppose the gelatin factory in the village of Gandhamur, for example, was not so much concerned with changing people's values as with simply shutting the factory down. To do so, they needed to persuade others that their cause was just, but even this process required the use of physical force, including violence (see Chapter 4). Likewise, Sunil's experience of fear could be read as a story about power more than a story about values insofar as he was younger than Faiza, from a relatively lower class and caste, and a guest in her home. Without this imbalance of social position, perhaps he would not have been so anxious about such a seemingly minor ethical misstep. Many studies of activists, community organizers, and social movement organizations have focused primarily on how these actors accumulate and employ power to further the interests of some at the expense of others; they have been studies of "contentious politics" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) more than contentious ethics.

Recently, however, some anthropologists have argued that the politics of social change cannot be separated from the ethics of social change. For example, Dave treats the activism of lesbians in Delhi as an ethical endeavor, aimed primarily at "the undoing of social moralities" (Dave, 2012, p. 6). Dave finds a focus on ethics especially relevant to understanding why some lesbians become activists and what motivates their work (Dave, 2012, p. 5). More broadly, Keane makes the analysis of social movements central to his far-reaching, synthetic study of the ethical dimensions of human life, arguing that, on the one hand, activists' commitments to a cause often cannot be explained by self-interest, and that, on the other hand, political movements often result in ethical transformation (Keane, 2016, pp. 187, 188). Keane is careful to point out that this does not mean that the politics of such movements can be reduced to ethics, but it does mean that their ethical dimensions are not reducible to politics (Keane, 2016, pp. 188, 218).

How, without reducing one to the other, can we describe the multiple and seemingly tight

conjunctions of ethics and politics in people's struggle activism? To answer this question, it will help to first explain that the concepts of ethics and politics I employ here, though distinct, are entangled with one another at their very roots. The philosopher Bernard Williams has suggested that the fundamental question of ethics is "How should one live?" (Williams, 1985, p. 4). In anthropology, we have long recognized that humans do not pursue their lives in isolation; we are social animals, and our actions are always also interactions. As such, ethical questions about how we should act or live presuppose political questions such as, "Who gets to determine how we act or live?"⁸ But if ethical questions lead to political questions, the reverse is also true. The political question of who should decide how to live is, itself, one among many ethical questions about how people ought to live. Thus, ethics and politics are intimately tied up with one another even at this abstract level.

People's struggles are clearly contentious politics; they are efforts at asserting the interested claims of some over the claims of others (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 4). But the claims of people's struggles are claims about justice; they are claims about what ought, or ought not, to be. Thus, people's struggles are contentious ethics. Moreover, as I describe in greater detail below, this ethical dimension is particularly prominent in people's struggles because of the importance of self-transformation and moral persuasion in this form of activism. For this reason, my analysis departs from the usual emphases in studies of social movement organizing—its structural preconditions, its strategies for accumulating resources and bringing powers to bear—by exploring the ways that activists adopt, enact, and promote particular values and ethical positions. But in doing so, I do not depart from politics. Rather, I take ethics and politics to be

⁸ Indeed, Williams notes that, in asking how one should live, the "generality of *one* already stakes a claim" (1985, p. 4). Insofar as the use of the general pronoun "one" entails the problem of who determines how people should live, this claim is *political* in the sense I employ here.

complexly entangled in people's struggles, knotted into one another so tightly that any account of one without the other would display an obvious lack. My analysis attempts to pick at the knot—not with any hope of separating ethics and politics into two parallel threads of social life, but so as to explore the ways in which they are bound together and, thus, improve our understanding of both.

1.4 Locating People's Struggles in Kerala Political Culture

The Indian state of Kerala occupies a long sliver of land on India's southwest coast, sloping east to west from the rainforests and tea plantations of the Western Ghats mountains down to the Arabian sea (see Figure 1). The state was formed along linguistic lines in 1956, several years after Indian independence, with Malayalam as the dominant language. The people of Kerala are commonly referred to as Malayalis. The region has long been one of the most densely populated in India, but the state contains none of India's major cities. The dominant settlement pattern could be called "rurban," with land parceled out into small plots, each separated from the next by a fence or stone wall (Sreekumar, 1990). The state's several cities and numerous towns are separated by an almost continuous spread of such plots, which are organized into large villages, each abutting the next. Fresh water and sunshine are abundant, and even the smallest plots will have a few coconut palms, a mango tree, or a small vegetable garden. However, few Malayalis make their living at agriculture. The average education level is high, and manual labor is considered low status.

Situated centrally in the Indian Ocean, approximately halfway between the Gulf Coast and the archipelagos of Southeast Asia, the Kerala region has long been integral to circuits of trade and migration that extend beyond the subcontinent. The state's relatively large minority populations of Muslims (26%) and Christians (18%) reflect this history, with many of the latter

tracing their roots to before the 15th century arrival of Vasco da Gama (Census Organization of India, 2011). Some scholars argue that the early-20th century success of Communist ideology in the region was also supported by these longstanding global linkages (Franke, 1993). International emigration climbed in the late-20th century, particularly to the Gulf states. In 2014, about 2.4 million foreign emigrants (compared to a domestic population of 34 million) sent home remittances amounting to approximately 36% of the state's net domestic product (Zachariah & Rajan, 2015).

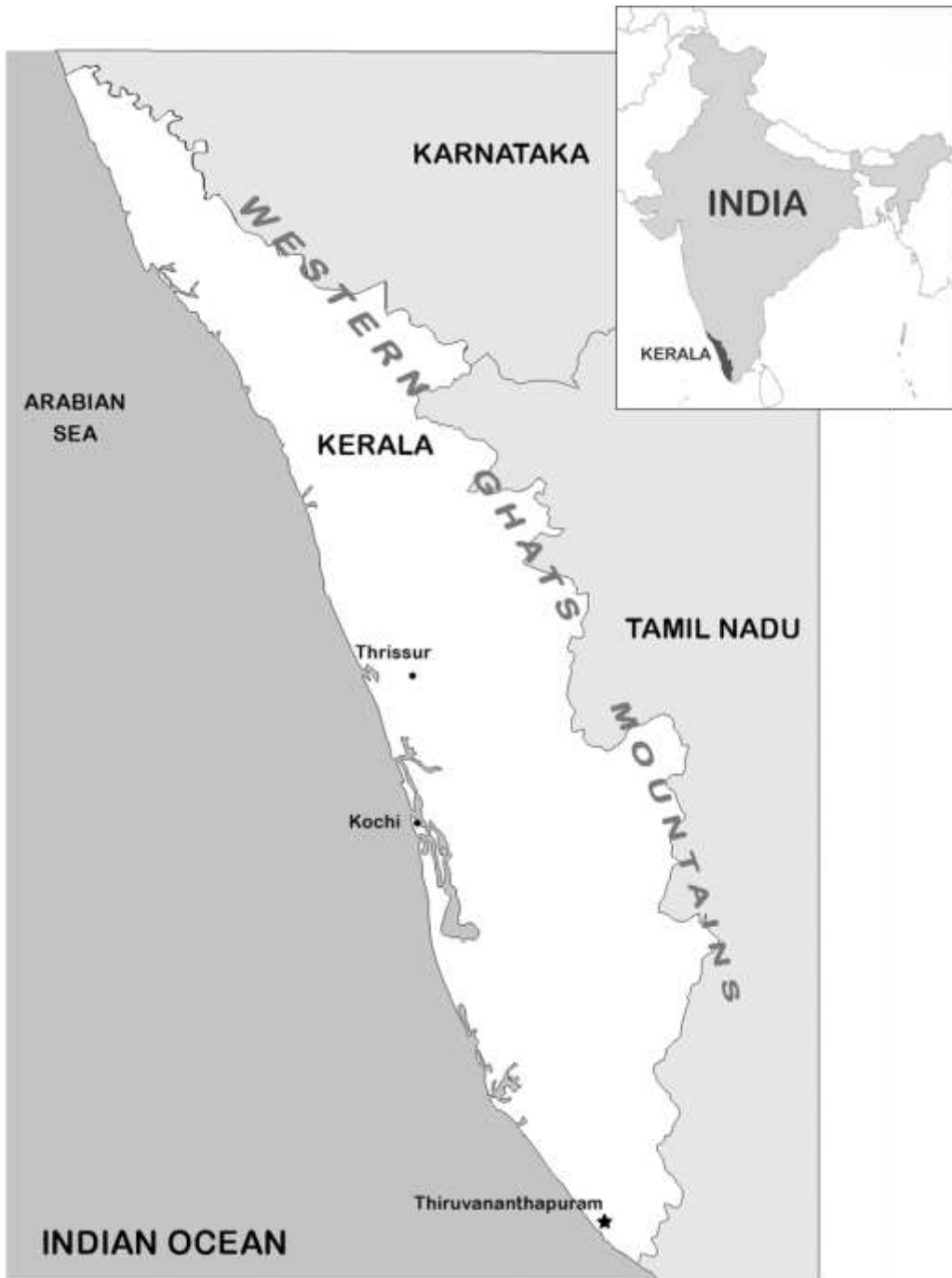


Figure 1: Map of Kerala

Kerala is known among scholars of politics and development for its numerous social movements during the late-19th and 20th centuries as well as its late-20th-century achievements in "human development" measures such as literacy rates, infant mortality, and life expectancy (Franke, 1993; Jeffrey, 1993; Ramachandran, 2000). With regard to the latter, the "Kerala Model" of development became one of economists' "favorite anomalies" in the 1980s and 90s because its human development indicators were on par with so-called developed nations despite per capita GDP being well below the Indian average (Franke, 1993, p. 2; Parayil, 2000). Many have seen in Kerala's social movement history—particularly the rise of the Communist party and ensuing redistributive policies—as an explanation for this development "enigma" (Lukose, 2009, p. 28). Under the rubric of "public action," scholars have described Kerala as a place where an organized, newspaper-reading, and politically savvy populace has held the government to account, successfully demanding policy that contributes to widespread social welfare (Heller, 1999; Jeffrey, 1993; Ramachandran, 2000; Sen, 2000; Tharamangalam, 2007).

Aside from this reputation among scholars, Kerala is known among leftist activists and NGO workers throughout India as a place where protestors are heard and development truly serves those in need. During an early documentary project on grassroots development projects, community organizers and NGO workers in other states often mentioned Kerala when they talked about their social change work; there, they said, such projects have actually succeeded. Similarly, activists in Delhi or Mumbai, such as the leaders of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), described Kerala's people's struggles as exemplars—that is, as instances of the same movements one finds elsewhere in India, but with a much better record of victory (Patkar, 2010).

My first visit to Kerala in 2005 was inspired by these seemingly utopian acclamations of

Malayali public life. Having read a bit of the Kerala Model literature, I was eager to see what widespread "public action" looked like up close. I was particularly interested in the politics of *samarāṇṇaḷ* ("struggles"),⁹ a term denoting local modes of social movement claim-making and protest politics. I wanted to understand why participation in such forms of political action was so widespread in Kerala and how this might be linked to apparently high levels of support for redistributive policies.

When I arrived in Kerala that first time, I had no difficulty locating *samarāṇṇaḷ*. Even for the most neutral, quietist Malayali, *samarāṇṇaḷ* are a pervasive and unavoidable part of everyday life, not just in the newspapers and on the TV news, but every time one sets out into the road. On any trip of more than a few kilometers, one can expect to meet a *samaram* or two along the way. From the window of a bus, one sees marchers hoisting their flags and chanting slogans as they make their way to the collector's office or the home of a local elected official. At a major intersection, one finds a small pavilion of blue tarps sheltering a lone man on a cot, doing his shift in a relay hunger strike. And occasionally, but more often than most Malayalis would like, one will not be able to set out at all; a political party, union, or action committee has called for *hartal*—a total shutdown of shops, auto-rickshaws, buses, or even the roads themselves. For most of those I met in Kerala, including many activists, *samaram* was primarily encountered in this way, simultaneously as spectacle and obstacle, something one moves through on one's way somewhere else.

⁹ The term *samaram* (singular of *samarāṇṇaḷ*) has no single, straightforward gloss in English. Although "struggle" is a common gloss among Malayalis, it can be a confusing stand-in for *samaram* because the English term does not have any necessary political connotation. However, other glosses such as "strike," "movement," and "protest" are also imprecise. Thus, I will use the Malayalam term when referring to *samaram* generally while glossing it as "struggle" in the context of *janakīya samaram* ("people's struggle"), which is the main topic of the dissertation and makes up the majority of references.

Thus, many Malayalis described *samaram* as a nuisance to the people and an obstacle to development. This is not to say that they did not recognize the idyllic picture of movement-driven progress sketched for me by out-of-state activists. Many praised the *samaranna!* of the past, such as the caste reform movements, the independence movement, the peasant rebellions and union strikes of the Communists, and the post-independence Vimochana Samaram ("liberation struggle") of religious minorities against the first elected Communist government. Like Kerala Model scholars, even outspoken opponents of *samaram* attributed many of the state's accomplishments to this history. And they acknowledged that *samaranna!* are still common today—but *too* common. In contemporary Kerala, marches and rallies in the streets were seen as keeping busy people from getting to work; union strikes were accused of driving away foreign investment; and *hartal* was denounced for reducing economic productivity. By and large, *samaram* was not seen as a motor for change, but as precisely what was holding Kerala back.

This rejection of the political culture of *samaram* is consistent with a late-20th transition in Kerala's political culture described by some anthropologists. In an ethnography of college student politics, Ritty Lukose has documented the rise of a neoliberal "civic public," in which some Malayalis see protest politics as an affront to the freedom of consumer citizens to participate in the market (Lukose, 2009, pp. 140,141). This transition can fruitfully be understood against the background of Filippo and Caroline Osella's ethnography of changing avenues for social mobility among the Izhava caste (Osella & Osella, 2000). While the *samaranna!* of early-20th-century Izhavas successfully challenged widespread practices of unapproachability, temple restrictions, and discrimination in education (Namboodiri, 1999), the Izhavas of the 1990s pursued "progress" by migrating to the Gulf and sending money home

(Namboodiri, 1999; Osella & Osella, 2000, p. 20). If social movement activity helped to drive Kerala's human development achievements, the resulting higher levels of education have arguably driven these new strategies for the pursuit of affluence in the global economy.

However, Kerala's shift from mobilization to marketization should not be overstated. As noted, the marches and *hartals* that mark "struggles" are still very much part of everyday life. Among these are those of the CPM and its youth organizations, which Lukose (2009) describes as a persistent counter to consumerist publicity. Moreover, as Adarsh once pointed out, while nearly everyone is opposed to *samarannaḷ* in principle, every critic is also a member of a trade union, a party, a caste or religious organization, a business association, or any of Kerala's countless other groups and organizations, all of which from time to time take up their own *samarannaḷ* as well. Consistent with this, I found that opponents of *samarannaḷ* generally made certain exceptions, drawing distinctions between legitimate and corrupt appropriations of Kerala's social movement history. Such distinctions help to explain why there were always plenty of *samarannaḷ* for everyone to complain about.

People's struggles (*janakīya samarannaḷ*) were one such exception to the general irritation with *samarannaḷ*. Over time, I learned that describing my research topic as *samaram* was likely to elicit annoyance or even disapproval, but *janakīya samarannaḷ* were considered a more worthy topic. This was not true for everyone. For some, particularly those whose aspirations aligned with the consumer citizenship Lukose describes, the two terms were equivalently repugnant; anything blocking the road was nothing more than an obstacle to commerce. Indeed, because people's struggles often concerned conflicts over natural resources, they might be considered particularly obstructive. But for most, people's struggles were in a separate category from those struggles organized by political parties, religious organizations,

trade unions, or other organized groups. They were, by definition, *samarāṇṇa!* on behalf of, rather than at the expense of, the people.

Part of what sets people's struggles apart, then, is that they are not organized by any of the parties, organizations, or factions to which, as Adarsh noted, every Malayali belongs. People's struggles are understood to be "grassroots" initiatives, organized by those who are in some way harmed by corporations, the state, or these other collectives—who are by definition only partial, interested political actors, not "the people."¹⁰ The Malayalam mass noun *janam* ("the people"), in contrast to *āḷuka!* (plural of *ā!*, "person"), is used when making an opposition between the people en masse and something else. For example, a frequently recited pun is that Kerala does not have *janādhipatyam* ("democracy," or "rule of the people") but *panādhipatyam*, the rule of *panam*, "money." As in this joke, oppositions between what is "of the people" and what is not are invariably normative, the former taking a positive valence. In other words, like the notion of "democracy," the concept of the people is stable in its highly positive ethical value but, for that very reason, always debated with respect to its defining attributes (Gallie, 1955). As I describe in Chapter 3, a large part of the politics of people's struggles is to promote a particular normative vision for what people's struggles ought to be.

The application of the term "people's struggle" to Kerala's social movement history exemplifies the normative and contested nature of the term. All of the major social movements described above as central to popular narratives of Malayali progress were also frequently described to me as people's struggles. However, if others were in earshot, these claims were

¹⁰ Ranciere (Rancière, 1999) and Laclau (Laclau, 2005) have both described "people's politics" that fits with this description, in which one group succeeds in representing its interests as those of the whole people, usually by virtue of being harmed by some interested part of the populace. For further discussion, see Chapter 4.

often debated. For example, when one man referred to the caste reform movements as people's struggles, another spoke up to counter that the appellation was inappropriate because these movements had only sought the uplift of individual castes. The first man rebutted that some of their leaders had preached caste equality for all and, besides, their ultimate impact had been on the caste system itself, not only the status of particular castes. Similarly, there were debates about whether the Communists had fought for the people or, on the contrary, the Liberation Struggle opposing Communist rule had done so. Thus, in the broadest sense, people's struggle could seemingly be applied to any social movement that one supported.

However, with reference to contemporary politics, "people's struggle" was primarily used to describe conflicts over environmental resources, such as campaigns to stop pollution from a factory, to prevent construction of a dam, or to reduce granite quarrying near a village. These campaigns were commonly understood to be organized by those directly affected by these localized conflicts. Being geographically bounded, people's struggles were not seen to be motivated by disqualifying interests of caste, religion, or party. Moreover, their primary institutional form was the "action council" (English, or sometimes, *samara samiti*), a collective actor consisting of affected individuals that was formed exclusively for the purpose of the campaign and often included positions such as convener, secretary, treasurer, and legal coordinator. As noted in Chapter 3, the politics of these action councils often stood in for the politics of the people (*janam*).

As suggested by the existence of the NAPM, the discourse and practice of people's struggle is not unique to Kerala. The term is used throughout India to refer to a wide variety of social movements, from armed uprisings in Jharkhand to the Indian independence movement. Since the mid-1990s, the term has been used interchangeably with "people's movement," by the

NAPM, which is a coalition of organizations pursuing a wide range of aims. As in Kerala's people's struggles, many NAPM campaigns and organizations focus on environmental conflicts. Moreover, the work of NAPM was an inspiration for the work of *Kēraḷīyam*—a magazine that served as a hub for people's struggle activism in Kerala and was one of two fieldsites for this research. The magazine has at times collaborated with NAPM to put on events or publish on topics relevant to people's struggles. In all of these ways, Kerala's people's struggles could be seen as part of a larger, national movement.

Nonetheless, Kerala's people's struggles are, in many ways, disconnected from the national discourse associated with NAPM, which has had little success in bringing them into its coalition. Part of the disconnect is linguistic. When NAPM held its national convention in Kerala in 2012, organizers were frustrated by a lack of local participation, which they attributed to a lack of interest. While there may have been some truth to this, Malayali activists also described to me the difficulty of communicating with these predominantly northern visitors, who used Hindi as a lingua franca. In addition, Kerala's people's struggles are predominantly directed at state, district, or even *pañcāyatt*-level¹¹ politicians and government officials. Thus, they rarely share the same targets with campaigns outside the state. Finally, as suggested above, while activists in Kerala's people's struggles work on similar issues to activists in NAPM organizations, they draw on social movement genealogies that are in many ways unique to Kerala. Thus, one could argue that what makes them appear as exemplary to activists in Delhi also makes them distinct from other Indian people's struggles altogether.

People's struggles generally have two major constituencies, which also represent two

¹¹ A *pañcāyatt* is a unit of local government in India that usually covers several villages or neighborhoods.

different vantage points from which this form of politics can be understood and pursued. People's struggles are, in one sense, the moral project of a loose network of environmental and social activists, including Faiza and Adarsh, who seek a leftist alternative to the politics of Kerala's dominant Communist parties. These activists intervene in various campaigns and protests, many related to conflicts over environmental resources, in order to realize their vision for a radical challenge to various social hierarchies (e.g., caste, class, gender, human-nature). Many of these activists describe *samaram* as a way of life, and their interventions in people's struggles are only one way of practicing that way of life. But although most Malayali's are familiar with the notion of "people's struggles," few have any acquaintance with this group. For most, people's struggles are the campaigns and protests alone, which are generally understood to be endogenous to particular neighborhood's or villages. From this perspective, the chief protagonists of people's struggles are action councils.

My field sites reflected this hybrid nature of people's struggles as both the politics of the activist network and the politics of action councils. To study the prior group, whom I call "solidarity organizers," I made a field site of the *Kēraḷīyam* magazine, for which Adarsh is assistant editor and sole employee. *Kēraḷīyam* was heir to a long tradition of magazines that served as institutional hubs for leftist alternatives to Communist party politics. In addition to spending many of my days, and a few nights, in the *Kēraḷīyam* office in Thrissur, I followed Adarsh on expeditions related to the magazine and its concerns. His work provided my primary route through the network, from which I branched out—interviewing, residing with, and observing the activities of others I met along the way.

My second field site was a campaign to shut down a gelatin factory in the village of Gandhamur, located just outside of Thrissur and only about a thirty-minute bicycle ride from the

home I shared with Adarsh and Faiza. During the time of my study, this people's struggle was one of the most prominent in Kerala as well as the recipient, for several months, of extensive collaboration and support from the activist network. In an early field visit in 2010, when I attended a youth service project organized by solidarity organizers in Gandhamur, I was fortunate to befriend the convener and primary organizer of the Gandhamur Action Council. It was with his invitation that I began participant observation of everyday organizing processes in the village, where I eventually went on to study the lives of those who opposed or avoided the campaign as well.

1.5 *Kēraḷīyam* Magazine

The founding of *Kēraḷīyam* magazine in November, 1998 approximately corresponded to the early emergence of "people's struggle" as a prominent form of political action in Kerala. From the start, the driving force behind the magazine was Sunny, a gregarious and energetic man with an extraordinary capacity for sustaining a wide circle of friends. Sunny and his co-founders did not originally envision *Kēraḷīyam* as a magazine about people's struggles, but they did intend the magazine to serve as a forum for discussing issues and coordinating activity among environmental and social activists across Kerala. As people's struggles increasingly became the focus of many of these activists, they also became bread-and-butter content for the magazine. A pivotal point came in 2004, when Sunny and others involved with *Kēraḷīyam* helped coordinate support for a campaign that succeeded in shutting down a polluting Coca-Cola plant (Aiyer, 2007; Sreemahadevan Pillai, 2008). This campaign helped to make people's struggle a publicly recognized form of political action in Kerala. It also crystalized *Kēraḷīyam's* self-image as a magazine committed to people's struggles.

Kēraḷīyam is published out of a small, rented office in the central-Kerala city of Thrissur

(see Figure 1). The office is located only a few blocks from the railway station, which lies along the major routes that run the length of the state. On any given day, a dozen or more visitors will stop in, some from the local area and some passing through on their way north or south. The office is often used as a meeting space as well—not for public gatherings, but for the meetings to plan these gatherings. One way or another, the magazine and its associates likely have a hand in any of the people's struggle-related events around the state. The magazine only reaches about 700 subscribers, and is not available in book stalls. It was rare to meet any non-subscribers who even knew of its existence. The magazine was well known to police intelligence, however, who raided and ransacked the office shortly after my departure. According to Adarsh, suspicions about the magazine's role in instigating people's struggles motivated this raid.

At the time of my visit, *Kēraḷīyam* was unique as a forum for discussion, collaboration, and community building among people's struggle activists. But historically, other magazines have played similar roles. Small-circulation publications have long offered an institutional basis for organizing among leftists who have broken with the dominant Communist parties in Kerala. As I noted above, print media were crucial to Communist organizing in the early twentieth century. This included not only pamphlets and newspapers intended for the masses, but also poetry, plays, fiction, and literary criticism. Beginning in 1937, the Communist Party of India's (CPI) Progressive Writer's Alliance sought to employ literature in the service of a Communist vision of social progress. Counter to these efforts, some writers and intellectuals published small journals that, though often left-oriented, rejected the ideological uniformity associated with the CPI (Govindan, 2008). Around these small magazines formed discursive communities composed primarily of intellectual elites. Today, *Kēraḷīyam* helps to connect just such a community of "alternative" leftists.

From the beginning, Kerala's alternative leftists, and their magazines, have been defined primarily by what they are not. Their rejection of party discipline, in particular, means that they are defined foremost by an explicit opposition to dogmatism, while otherwise taking up a wide range of ideologies. Throughout the twentieth century, it is possible to trace ideological trends among the alternative left—e.g., humanism to Maoism to environmentalism—which are traversed by life histories and genealogies of influence. But the strands of connection are many and the trends are never all-encompassing. What defines the tradition is, mainly, that it is "alternative." This is true not only for alternative leftism as such, but also for many individuals. Many of those involved in people's struggle politics were raised in Communist families, or were active in the Party as college students, but later broke away. They came to people's struggle activism looking for an alternative.

Although I coin the term "alternative leftist" to describe patterns of ideology and activism identified through fieldwork and archival research, my analysis draws on local discourse about "alternative" (*badal*). Sunny, Adarsh, and other *Kēraḷīyam* associates described the magazine and many of their projects as *badal*, contrasting them with what was *mukhyadhāra* (literally, "main flow" or "mainstream"), such as daily newspapers, popular cinema, or large political parties. The concept of *badal* was also one way in which interventions in people's struggles and the ethical rescaling practices described earlier hung together. People's struggles were *badal* in that they were not the much larger, more common, and more powerful *samarāṇṇaḷ* of political parties. The ethical evaluation and reform of ordinary practices, such as the use of plastic bags, set activists apart from those around them. Thus, being *badal* was central to being an activist.

In addition to an emphasis on ideological freedom, opposition to institutionalization has been characteristic of Kerala's alternative left. Although those associated with *Kēraḷīyam* sought

to build a larger movement, most believed that forming a party or umbrella organization would only hinder them in doing so. The standard argument was that such an institution, once formed, would only seek its own growth and survival rather than furthering the cause it was meant to serve.¹² This was arguably one reason that a magazine—with its office, its editorial board, and its subscription list—was the most robust institution binding this activist network together.

Two important predecessors of *Kēraḷīyam*'s work were *Janakīya Sāmskārika Vēdi* ("People's Cultural Platform," hereafter "*Vēdi*") and *Pāḍhabhēdam* (often glossed in English as "Altertext") magazine. The former was a literary group that some regarded as the "cultural wing" of Kerala's Maoist party. However, although Maoism was the dominant alternative left ideology of the time, the *Vēdi* and its magazine *Prēraṇa* brought together a wide array of intellectuals under a general program of "people's political power" (Sreejith, 2005). The group disbanded after only two years due to disagreements over the Maoist party's positions regarding the use of violence. Those involved would go on to pursue a wide range of causes, and the alternative left never again achieved such unity.

Pāḍhabhēdam was founded in the late 1980s by a former editor of *Prēraṇa*, who like many participants in the *Vēdi* had abandoned Maoism. The magazine was inaugurated at a conference of activists representing the full diversity of post-Maoist alternative leftism: feminism, environmentalism, health justice, human rights, palliative care, and other causes.¹³ For several years, the magazine provided a platform not only for literary and intellectual exchange, but also for updates on "peoples resistance" (*janakīya pratirōdham*) throughout the state. Like

¹² According to some activists, this was one reason that the NAPM had been unsuccessful in organizing in Kerala despite the large number of active people's struggles in the state.

¹³ Some Maoists attended as well, but the conference had no institutional link to Maoist political parties, and Maoism was no longer a dominant ideological framework.

Prēraṇa before it, *Pāḍhabhēdam* was published out of Vanchi Lodge, a rented room in downtown Thrissur, only a couple of kilometers from *Kēraḷīyam*'s office today. According to one former activist who had made Vanchi Lodge his home for several years, it was an even more lively gathering place than *Kēraḷīyam*. The discussion there was so perpetual and earnest, in fact, that he hardly slept during the years he stayed there. The magazines came and went, he said, but the flow of activists through Vanchi Lodge never let up.

The normative concept of people's politics is an ideological thread that runs through from the *Vēdi* and *Prēraṇa* to *Pāḍhabhēdam* to *Kēraḷīyam* today. *Prēraṇa* wrote in a Maoist idiom of "people's revolution," and *Pāḍhabhēdam* wrote primarily of "people's resistance," but the term "people's struggle" was also occasionally used interchangeably with these other terms. And in each of these iterations of alternative leftism, the invocation of the people as a collective actor is in tension with the relatively limited subset of intellectuals who make this invocation. This tension is arguably most marked in the case of the *Vēdi*, whose magazine *Prēraṇa* primarily circulated avant garde literature and theory among an intellectual elite. Thus, within this tradition, the people was first adopted as a political ideal—a radical democratic alternative to the authority of the Party. What remained was to find people who would take up this people's politics.

The relation between *Kēraḷīyam* and people's struggles can be seen as one approach to resolving the problem of people's politics without people. Publication of *Pāḍhabhēdam* ceased in 1992, and the building that housed Vanchi Lodge was torn down for road construction shortly thereafter. When *Kēraḷīyam* was founded in 1996, it occupied the space, both figuratively and to some extent literally, left by earlier Thrissur magazines. But while *Kēraḷīyam* took up *Pāḍhabhēdam*'s place as a hub of alternative left activism, it came to focus more on advocacy

and campaign updates, and less on literature and theory. These emphases were more in line with Sunny's own interests, but they also responded to a growing number of environmental conflicts related to state development projects and economic liberalization—issues that were not being taken up by any of the major political parties. Thus, *Kēraḷīyam* and its associates found a political field fertile for the ideology of people's politics. The work of the magazine in constructing people's struggle as an emergent type of political action is the subject of Chapter 3.

Kēraḷīyam brings together two somewhat disjunctive alternatives to mainstream leftism, which also represent two different approaches to the environmental conflicts that predominate among people's struggles. Many activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, such as Faiza, considered themselves environmental activists (*paristhitika pravarttakar*), and the members of the Gandhamur Action Council commonly referred to all solidarity organizers in this way. But some rejected this moniker. For example, Dhanya, the convener of the official solidarity committee for the Gandhamur campaign, contrasted her "political activity" (English) with the eco-centric orientation of environmentalists. She said that she was not primarily concerned with the environment, but with social inequality, which she still understood in Marxist terms even though she rejected the politics of the dominant Communist parties. Likewise, across the activist network that Dhanya shared with Faiza and Adarsh, the relative importance of ecocentrism and social justice in people's struggles was a topic of much contention.

The tension between environmentalist and Marxist visions of people's struggle, and of the role of *Kēraḷīyam*, can be read as one variety of entanglement of ethics and politics. While Dhanya called her approach "political" (English, or sometimes, *rāṣṭrīyam*) many of those who advocated a more eco-centric activism did so in the idiom of *mūlyanṇal*, or "values." For example, Francis, who had a regular column in *Kēraḷīyam*, argued that an over-emphasis on

conflicts over the control of environmental resources would ultimately be self-defeating unless activists undertook to bring about a fundamental transformation of *mūlyaññal* as well. Invoked in this way, *mūlyaññal* connotes ethical values without any necessarily religious connotation. Thus, some activists contrasted with *mūlyaññal* with *dhārmikata*, a term more often used in religious settings and associated with notions of purity, sin, and the conduct of one's proper role in the social order.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Francis and others who advocated for greater emphasis on *mūlyaññal* also at times stressed the need for the elaboration of a spiritual side to their activism. In line with Dhanya's criticism of environmentalism, Francis insisted that this transformation of values must not be human-centric, but eco-centric.

For those who argued along these lines, consistently enacting environmentalist values through organic farming, vegetarianism, and "natural cure" (*prakṛti cikilsa*) was inseparable from intervention in people's struggles. As the leader of an organic farming collective told me, "people's struggle is a way of life." For some, particularly followers a "natural life" tradition influenced by Gandhi's dietary activism, their own bodily practices were the crucial arena of struggle and campaigns like that in Gandhamur were only one avenue for enacting an alternative way of life.

These disjunctures between Marxist and environmentalist approaches to people's struggle can be seen as rooted in the historical influence of both Marxist and Gandhian ideologies upon

¹⁴ Dumont (Dumont, 1970, p. 251) defines *dharma*, the Sanskrit root of the Malayalam *dhārmikata*, as "action conforming to universal order." It is, in part, the connection Dumont describes between this moral concept and social hierarchy—especially, though not exclusively, caste-hierarchy—that make this concept distasteful to the activists described here. On the other hand, *mūlyam*, the singular of *mūlyaññal*, can be used broadly to describe orders of value other than the ethical, such as economic value. It is this semantic breadth that, arguably, makes it attractive for appropriation and resignification within a variety of activist ethical projects—Francis' argument being only one example.

Kerala's alternative leftists. Both Gandhian and Marxist approaches to organizing had their heydays in the 1920s-1940s. Even in that period, one can see tensions between the Marxist emphasis on power and interests and the Gandhian approach to organizing as a moral struggle (Namboodiripad, 1958).

On the pages of *Kēraḷīyam*, and in the daily lives of activists like Faiza and Adarsh, the disjuncture between environmentalist and Marxist strands of alternative leftism was manifest as a tension between changing oneself and changing others. Work on "values" was primarily work on the self, while interventions in people's struggles was "political" insofar as it concerned inequities between people. But it should be clear from the example of Sunil's fear (and my own) that this contrast between changing oneself and changing others does not align tidily with the distinction between ethics and politics outlined above. And this is not only because that distinction is already inescapably untidy. The force activists exerted on themselves always overflowed, exerting pressure on those around them as well. Likewise, to challenge inequities between people was, obviously, a kind of response to the question "how should one live?" Thus, questions about relations between ethics and politics are good to ask in part because they were debated by activists themselves, but these debates are more useful for drawing our attention to these questions than for resolving them.

While the activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* were diverse with respect to caste, wealth, and level of education, they can broadly be described as middle class. An important caveat must be made, however: while those involved were generally "in the middle" in the sense that they were neither very rich nor very poor, they were definitively not middle class in their aspirations. For example, Francis grew up in a lower-middle class Christian family and received formal education through the tenth grade—the level to which public education in Kerala is both free and

mandatory. Thereafter, he worked for some time as an auto-rickshaw driver, during which time his involvement with the union led him into leftist politics and atheism. Later, he became a freelance insurance salesman but, finding this work incompatible with his values, he gave it up after several years. Today, he is self-employed, conducting magic shows with moral themes and selling leftist and environmentalist literature at public events. This way of life has been a source of some financial hardship and precarity for his family. Thus, he has had a level of privilege and opportunity that is neither remarkably high nor low, but he has used what opportunities he had in ways that run counter to increasing his wealth or improving his status in the usual sense (e.g., by building a house or giving his daughters large dowries).

Many activists have more advantages than Francis, and some have fewer, but their economic and social status broadly tends to the same pattern. Adarsh, for example, comes from a Nair household (historically a dominant land-owning caste in Kerala) and has a master's degree in journalism. He and Faiza met in journalism school, she being the daughter of a Muslim public school teacher. However, their cumulative income as assistant editor of *Kēraḷīyam* and staff member of an environmental NGO, respectively, amounts to less than a man could make as an unskilled manual laborer in Kerala. Office work is certainly higher status than manual labor, but their jobs are also relatively illegible—our neighbors joked about not understanding what kind of jobs these were. Indeed, their social position was difficult to assess according to the usual standards of status in Kerala.

Nonetheless, it is worth repeating that there were very few participants in *Kēraḷīyam* for whom access to food, clothing, or shelter were ever in doubt. As Adarsh explained with reference to himself, even most of those who lived on a shoestring did so with the knowledge that, should the string snap, they had kin or friends who could help them out. There was still risk

involved in such choices, of course, but there were few who came from such difficult positions that they could not afford to take such risks.

My initial attraction to studying the activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* was, in large part, due to the warmth and openness with which they welcomed me. I cannot say precisely what motivated this generosity on their part. I was introduced to Sunny through contacts made in my own past environmental justice activism, and certainly this helped me to be recognized by some as a fellow traveler. At the same time, Sunny and Adarsh expressed to me early on that they saw my work as valuable for the critical perspective that it could bring to their work. After preliminary fieldwork, I presented them with a report evaluating the impact of the magazine that was frank in its criticism, and they welcomed the feedback. Throughout fieldwork, I often spoke with Adarsh, in particular, about my emerging analyses and received critical feedback in return. Likewise, many of those involved with *Kēraḷīyam* accepted me as a fellow intellectual and interlocutor. I know that they are waiting to read, assess, and respond to my analysis of their work.

1.6 The Gandhamur Action Council

Like *Kēraḷīyam*, the Gandhamur Action Council was a collective effort, but was largely driven by the leadership of one person. Vijayan, official Convener of the Action Council, was a former employee at the gelatin factory who, as a result of a labor dispute, had been terminated in 2005. After working in an Arabian Gulf country for two years, he returned in 2008 and immediately became involved with several other Gandhamur residents and area environmentalists in founding the Action Council. Vijayan grew up in Gandhamur and had an extensive friend network. By both his own account and those of longtime friends, he had always enjoyed being at the center of social activity. He also had been very active in student politics

during his college years. Beginning in the 1990s, there had been a few previous attempts to organize opposition to pollution from the gelatin factory, but they had quickly been bought off or petered out. That the Action Council had not met a similar fate was attributed, by supporters and opponents alike, to Vijayan's persistence and leadership ability.

By forming an action council, Vijayan and other local leaders were conscientiously drawing on the existing repertoires of people's struggle organizing. People's struggles had become a widely recognized form of political action by this time, particularly after the success of the campaign against the Coca-Cola plant in 2004. Solidarity organizers from the region, many of whom had close connections with *Kēraḷīyam*, immediately began to collaborate with the new campaign. I first encountered the campaign and met Vijayan in 2010, when a *Kēraḷīyam* associate organized a week-long service trip for high school students in Gandhamur. Thereafter, my research gradually came to focus on this campaign and on the collaboration between solidarity organizers and the Action Council.

According to older members of the Action Council, when the gelatin factory first arrived in 1975, everyone welcomed it except one naysaying Brahmin, who warned that it would destroy the land. But no one listened to the Brahmin because, other than him, everyone wanted a job. So the story goes. People disagree about whether the factory used to smell in those early years. But by the time I first arrived, the experience of pollution had become pervasive, and even opponents of the Action Council agreed that the smell was awful at times.

The Gandhamur factory produced ossein, a fibrous protein that is a major component of bones, which was taken to a second factory for making gelatin. The factory primarily used the bones of pigs and cattle, which were trucked in from meat producers across India. To extract the ossein, the bones were soaked in hydrochloric acid until the mineral content dissolved. The

remaining liquid was then filtered and distilled. This produced a great quantity of gaseous emissions, which had a very distinctive and unpleasant smell, both chemical and putrid at once. People who lived near the factory complained of waking up at night, coughing, and many attributed breathing ailments to the smell. Another byproduct was a blackish sludge, which had the same smell that was emitted via an underground pipe into a nearby river. Though the river had previously been used for bathing and washing clothes, people now avoided the water, which they said caused itching and rashes.

Gandhamur is located in a densely populated rural area between the cities of Thrissur and Kochi (see Figure 1). According to elderly residents, Gandhamur village has grown considerably since the gelatin factory arrived. But most did not attribute this growth to the factory. After all, though Gandhamur now has many more paved roads and concrete houses, so do other nearby villages. The people of Gandhamur are primarily Hindu and Christian, with only a small Muslim population. Among Hindus, there are only a few Brahmins. Nairs, who once owned most of the land, and Pulaya, who once did most of the agricultural labor, still reside here. But artisanal castes—carpenters, masons, and clay workers—predominate. Few among these practice their traditional trades, but caste, employment, and wealth are still roughly correlated: the Nairs of the former ruling family have larger houses and higher levels of education, the clay workers own provision shops and live in more modest houses, and the former agricultural laborers now go for construction work, mostly building other people's houses. Intermingled with these major groups are many families of various descent who have settled in Gandhamur as, with population growth and express ways, it has become less of a village and more of suburb of Thrissur and Kochi. Some have also arrived to work in the factory, which employs about 140 people from the area.

The caste and class makeup of the Gandhamur Action Council was consistent with the

demographics of the village as a whole. Active participants in the Council included Rani, the descendent of Nair aristocracy whom some still referred to casually (and out of earshot) as "the princess" (*tanpurāṭṭi*), as well as Rajan, a descendent of her former bonded laborers, whom she still occasionally hired for gardening work. A significant portion of campaign participants were men, usually of artisanal castes, employed in skilled contract work—e.g., painting, plumbing, or electrical work—who could easily take a day or two off at short notice. Vijayan, who was Nair but not royalty, had made some money in the Gulf, but his brother was an unskilled laborer. More generally, leadership in the campaign was dominated by Hindu and Christian men of relatively high caste, education level, and financial means.

A significant contingent of women were involved in the campaign as well, including some who had limited leadership roles. By law, fifty percent of elected representatives in local government must be women, and some of these representatives were active in supporting the campaign. However, while women were often in the forefront when representing the campaign to the public (e.g., at sit-ins or in the presentation of written appeals to politicians), most strategy and decision-making was done by men (Binoy, 2014). This was a topic of contention and is explored further in Chapter 2.

My fieldwork in Gandhamur centered on the "struggle tent" (*samarapantal*), which was also the center of activity for the campaign. Action Council meetings were held in the tent, and it was also used as a forum for campaign events, such as visits by prominent social figures. This was a canvas pavilion covering a concrete platform, like a theater stage, set up at the edge of the road just outside the factory gates. During the first several months of my final stint of dissertation research, when many campaign participants believed victory might come any day, there were always a few people occupying the tent. Every evening twenty or more people would

gather to discuss the latest developments. A few men slept in the tent as well. Sunil and I rode our tandem bicycle to the tent nearly every day during this period, stopping at tea shops along the way to hear the news. Later on, when things slowed down and the tent was often empty, we more often arranged ahead of time to visit specific people, usually at their homes.

Despite this focus on the campaign, its participants, and their activities, I gave considerable time and effort to understanding the lives and perspectives of campaign opponents and non-participants as well. Although management barred factory employees from talking with me shortly after I arrived, there were several who were very eager to share their stories. Chief among these were three mid-level employees, one retired, who had worked at the factory for a long time and wished to defend it. I also spent time with many in the village who were upset about the pollution but did not wish to participate in the campaign. The vast majority of residents were in this latter category.

Like the *Kēraḷīyam* office, the Gandhamur struggle tent was the site of many conversations about justice and injustice. Moreover, claims about injustice were crucial to campaign strategy, which consisted largely of attempting to win the support of popular opinion. However, unlike *Kēraḷīyam* associates, for whom a tactical commitment to moral persuasion was rooted in ideologies of intellectual freedom and egalitarianism, the Action Council employed persuasion out of necessity. Despite having some wealthy members, the resources of the Council—in terms of money and political contacts—were no match for those of the factory, which is a joint venture between a Japanese company and the Kerala State Government. Vijayan and other leaders made it clear that they would not have shirked from employing whatever advantage they could gain, including using physical force in various ways, as I discuss in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, this is not to say that seeking and arguing for justice were less

authentically pursued in Gandhamur than in Thrissur. Action Council members understood themselves to be pursuing justice, and the mix of tactics they employed makes their work all the more interesting for exploring entanglements of ethics and politics.

My fieldwork in the Gandhamur campaign was limited in two important ways. First, I was often much more observer than participant. This was in part because of legal restrictions on the participation of non-citizens in such activities. It was also because I realized early on that, if I became overly identified with the campaign, I would likely lose all possibility of meaningful fieldwork with opponents and non-participants. Second, beginning in 2012, I was unable to actually reside in Gandhamur, or stay there overnight, because the police warned me that I did not have permission to do so. Although the basis of this restriction was questionable, I complied because the police had otherwise been very accommodating, with one local official even agreeing to sit with me for extensive interviews. Given the various controversies surrounding the campaign at the time, I considered my level of access fortunate.

1.7 Methods

My first encounter with people's struggle politics was during exploratory fieldwork in 2005, when I visited the site of the Coca-Cola campaign mentioned earlier. There, I met Sunny, the founder and managing editor of *Kēraḷīyam*. At the time, he and other *Kēraḷīyam* associates were highly involved in this campaign, which had become an international news story when it was eventually successful in shutting down the factory (Giridharadas, 2005; Sreemahadevan Pillai, 2008). Between 2005 and 2014, I conducted six field visits to Kerala, observing people's struggle activism and related activities for a cumulative total of approximately three years. However, it was only with my final, fourteen-month stint of dissertation fieldwork, between 2013 and 2014, that I focused in on *Kēraḷīyam* magazine and Gandhamur village as my primary

field sites.

Fieldwork was ethnographic in the anthropological tradition, the hallmark of which is intimate, long-term acquaintance with everyday life—in this case, chiefly with the everyday lives of activists (Agar, 1980, p. 120; Malinowski, 1984). In keeping with this tradition, the primary method, participant observation, primarily consisted of carrying a notebook, audio recorder, and camera with me at all times, and jotting notes or taking recordings of whatever seemed pertinent to my various lines of inquiry or, alternatively, suggested a new line of inquiry (Wolcott, 2005, pp. 57-60, 81). Ideally, I would write up fieldnotes, transcribe recordings, and organize other materials (e.g., photos, pamphlets, newspaper clippings) in the evenings. However, because I lived with Faiza and Adarsh, even these activities were often punctuated by unexpected encounters with new "data" in the form of dinners, movie outings, visiting family members, and late-night discussions. Likewise, when I was not with organizers or writing up my notes, I was no less doing research—haircuts, grocery trips, and pick-up basketball all presented new opportunities to hear gossip about the Gandhamur campaign and other people's struggles, trace networks of kinship and friendship, and explore the cultural context in which the organizers I studied were trying to make change.

My collaboration with Sunil, who served as a full-time research assistant during the bulk of the time I lived with Faiza and Adarsh, greatly enriched my fieldwork and analysis. I had sought out a full-time assistant after a chronic medical condition took a turn for the worse in late 2012, and I was uncertain whether I would be able to write my own field jottings. Fortunately, my condition had greatly improved by the time I began fieldwork. Nonetheless, I trained Sunil in taking field jottings and in the use of recording equipment, and he accompanied me nearly continually throughout the research process. In the evenings, we would sit on the balcony and

share our jottings with one another, discussing all we had observed. Recordings of these discussions proved to be an invaluable resource. Sunil was from a Muslim family in a relatively rural part of Kerala. Having just completed his BSW, he was eager to learn more about regional social issues, but people's struggle activism was entirely new to him. As such, he helped me to grasp what activist lives look like from a non-activist Malayali perspective. At the same time, the process of his emergence into activism became an object of inquiry in its own right.

Fieldwork was organized around questions that emerged from the research process (Agar, 1980, pp. 119-120). Over time, I narrowed in on emergent topics in how I oriented my attention during observation, in how I asked questions of those I studied, and in the amount of space I gave them in my notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, pp. 26-30). Likewise, selection of events and people to observe was tactical; I sought out a diverse range of perspectives on any given issue until I reached a point of apparent "saturation" (Padgett, 1998, p. 52). Selecting what to follow and what to leave aside was one of my greatest challenges. Adarsh often made fun of me as I scrambled to keep up with countless new activist acquaintances, new developments in the Gandhamur campaign, or new lines of inquiry. To state the obvious: activist lives are often active, frequently pivoting to the next project or the next paradigm, and tracking all this motion could easily become a frantic enterprise. Adarsh compared my predicament to his early days as a journalist, when he also had aspired to document everything that mattered. Over time, the impossibility of both our work became a running joke between us.

The activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* were frequently on the move, traveling to different struggles, protests, seminars, documentary screenings, poetry readings, and other events. In conducting research, I could expect to see a certain number of the most involved activists from time to time, but it was hard to know beforehand who would turn up when and

where. This was true to some extent for local activists in the Gandhamur campaign as well. For many of them, people's struggle was mostly about gathering every evening in the struggle tent (*samarapantal*) that served as campaign headquarters. During the more active periods of the campaign, I could always find at least a few men there (women stopped by, but not as frequently or for as long) chatting about the latest developments. But Vijayan, the convener of the Action Council, was a whirlwind of motion. He moved in tighter orbit than Adarsh, but he was just as difficult to follow.

The challenge posed by the high activity of activists was only partly about keeping up. The greater challenge was locating patterns in all of the activity. Anthropological insight often relies on cyclical motion. To understand the importance of a cultural practice in everyday life, for example, it is best to see it multiple times. But activists' self-understanding worked against this logic because they had a strong tendency to see every event as unique. For example, when protesters gathered at the gates of the Gandhamur gelatin factory were beaten by police, the Action Council received unprecedented media attention. Adarsh called it an opportunity that had never come before and would never come again, and the same sense of urgency was reflected in the mood of local activists. Likewise, with regard to a particular court decision or the visit of a particular politician, activists stressed that wins and losses were one-time events. This is why they were always in motion; action was needed *now*.

Of course, even in the most radical projects of social change, there are cycles. In the format of magazine articles, the seating arrangements during activist seminars, or the rituals of display by which a polluted paddy field was made to appear unjust, I did begin to find recurrent patterns. But I was always aware of a tension, present in the lives of the activists I studied, between attention to any moment as unique and attention to that same moment as a recurrence. If

analysis was only about pulling out the patterns, then I would lose sight of much of what activism was all about. The problem, then, was to find the balance between narrating the progression of events and finding the stability in the flow.

This problem of temporal context became central to my analysis. Upon returning from my final stint of fieldwork, I began by reorganizing my photo, video, and audio files into dated folders, one for each day I had been in Kerala. My fieldnotes, which were ordered chronologically in the manner of a diary, then became the backbone of my analysis, with other materials easily locatable for any day's notes. This helped me to retain awareness of how, for example, interviews with Adarsh in July, October, and December might be differently situated with regard to ongoing events. This is not to say that I assumed the temporality of my fieldnotes as standard. Rather, I gave close attention to how activists narrativized their own projects and experiences, and this process was aided by the temporal framework of my own materials. In this way, I gradually narrowed in on key storylines in order to construct accounts of what happened, why, and how.

I use these stories to inquire into the puzzles that came to occupy my attention during fieldwork. Often a puzzle had to do with some tension or dilemma that I glimpsed again and again in various shades and forms—for example, the problem of how an activist's expression of ethical freedom can be felt as a coercive force by those around them. In much of my analysis, I select stories that bring a tension to the fore, and then follow them along to see how things play out down the line. Some chapters are dominated by a single storyline, while others combine bits and pieces of stories to build a more traditional, temporally diffuse ethnographic account. And then there are the stories—like that of Sunil's activist education or the Gandhamur campaign's descent—that make occasionally appearances in relation to the various puzzles of multiple

chapters. In each of these ways, I attempt to sustain a sense of the progressive temporality of activist lives while also addressing enduring problems that define an activist life as such.

There are some puzzles and themes that are present across several chapters, but never become the main focus of analysis. Gender relations in people's struggle activism, and activists' efforts to transform gender relations, form one such broad theme. The politics of gender, and especially the roles of women in Kerala's public life, have been the focus of several major works (Arunima, 2003; Devika, 2007; Jeffrey, 1993; Lindberg, 2005; Oommen, 2007), including one which focuses on people's struggles (Binoy, 2014). As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, activists associated with people's struggles included the transformation of gender norms as one aim within their broader vision for eliminating social hierarchy in Malayali life. Nonetheless, the environmental and social activism described here continued to be largely dominated by men, and the effects of this dominance are apparent in the stories told here (see, in particular, Chapter 7). However, a full analysis of these forms of patriarchy and the mechanisms of their perpetuation must remain for future work.

1.8 From Freedom and Unfreedom to Creativity and Persuasion

The activists described here—both those associated with *Kēraḷīyam* and those in the Gandhamur Action Council—self-consciously organized their everyday lives around certain social change agendas. They are the sort of people who, when a researcher asks them about the values that motivate their work, not only have ready answers, but are also ready to show why these values should motivate the researcher as well (cf. Harding, 1987). In their self-understanding, they are "self-conscious people who aspire to stand apart from the taken-for-granted flow of life in order to act upon it" (Keane, 2016, p. 200). Whether by striving to transform their own lives or by attempting to influence the lives of others, these activists exert

force upon evaluative practice. That is part of what it means to be an activist.

If our aim is to understand the forces that drive ethical change—whether in the lives of activists or in the lives of those they seek to influence—one answer might be found in activists' own agency. Following cues from activists' self-understanding, we might portray them as critically distancing themselves from the norms in which others are immersed, inventing alternative values that are not beholden to these norms (or, perhaps, to any norms (Warner, 1999)), and then working to get others to re-orient to these values as well. Dave's (2012) analysis of activist ethics tells such a story, in which the inventive "ethics" of activists is rigorously distinguished from the socially-enforced norms of "morality" which they struggle against. Similarly, other depictions of activist approaches to ethical life have emphasized the agentic efficacy of activists, even when activists' self-understandings credit change in themselves and others to forces outside themselves (Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005). And as Keane argues, such self-conscious objectification of existing norms and effortful work for reform is surely one important driver of ethical change (Keane, 2016, p. 200).

However, as Sunil's plastic bag story suggests, the very efficacy of activists' upon the lives of others also implies a limit to accounts of free self-invention and resistance to norms. If Faiza and Adarsh are having such an impact upon Sunil, then this should also lead us to ask about their impacts upon other activists or upon one another. Does Adarsh pack a bag daily as a free act of self-invention, or is he also worried about how Faiza will see him? Moreover, even by their own self-description, Faiza and Adarsh did not become "activists" by an endogenous act of critical distancing, but through the inspiration of exemplars, the persuasive appeals of others, and the stubbornly apparent injustices they saw around them. Might we not expect that, even now, their ethical lives continue to be influenced as much by such prods and lures as by their own

agency? Thus, once we start exploring how people exert force upon the ethical lives of those around them, distinctions between the freedom of change-oriented ethics and the unfreedom of other ethical lives begin to come undone.

One of the reasons that anthropological accounts of activist ethics have not attended more closely to unfreedoms is that the anthropology of ethics, generally, has tended to focus on relations between ethical subjects (usually, though not always, individuals (Laidlaw, 2014b)) and moral codes, rather than on relations between people. Part of this has to do with the pervasive influence in this literature of Foucault's ethical theory, which describes the moral domain as composed of "codes of behavior and forms of subjectivation" (1990, p. 29). As noted earlier, the latter are the ways in which the subject works upon itself, a process that can include orienting in various ways to moral codes. While this arguably includes cultivating responsiveness to disciplinary forces from outside oneself, as Mahmood (2005) describes, Foucault takes up this framework with another purpose in mind. He wishes to explore the possibility of ethical freedom, which he describes not as an obedience to codes but, on the contrary, as a search for zones in which moral codes are relatively undeveloped, opening up spaces in which freedom can be exercised (Faubion, 2001, p. 89; Foucault, 1990, p. 30).

Anthropologists have found Foucault's framework useful for exploring how ethical subjects remake themselves, and some have argued that such analyses are an important supplement to earlier work describing how social norms produce ethical subjects and reproduce themselves. However, this framework obscures or marginalizes some other aspects of ethical life. First, we have no tools for describing the remaking of moral codes, such as the work undertaken by many of the activists described here. In Foucault's framework, subjects orient to codes in various ways, but in doing so they remake themselves, not the codes. Second, and

relatedly, we have no tools for describing how subjects act upon one another. For Foucault, teasing, serving, battling, debating, or giving pleasure to others can all be taken up as ethical techniques, but they are only ethics insofar as they contribute to work upon oneself. And this makes it difficult to appreciate the unfreedoms that work upon oneself may (even inadvertently) entail. We can well analyze what avoiding plastic does for Adarsh and Faiza, but it becomes more difficult to appreciate the impact of these practices upon Sunil.

Indeed, what Sunil's case makes clear is that once we attend to how people remake norms or put pressure upon one another—the quintessential activities of an activist ethics—the apparent "unfreedoms" of ethical life multiply. Accountability to moral codes may be one source of limitation to a subject's freedom, but so can accountability to another person's evaluation even when no systematic code is in place. Such was often the case among activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, whose alternative leftism was resolutely opposed to ideological conformity but nonetheless committed to radical moral change. Indeed, for newcomers to this social circle like Sunil and me, anxiety about missteps was only heightened by the lack of any ethical rule book that one might consult. Such forces are difficult to account for in Foucault's framework, which imagines the absence of codes as a space of relative freedom.

If the anthropology of ethics has insufficiently attended to these forms of unfreedom, it may be because most studies have examined ethnographic setting in which moral codes are relatively explicit and well-developed (Hirschkind, 2006; Laidlaw, 1995; Mahmood, 2005; Robbins, 2004). While Foucault was looking to get away from codes, it should be no surprise that anthropologists have found his dual concern with subject-code and subject-self relations most helpful for theorizing ethical domains, like religions, in which codes often play a defining role. For it is in the context of such coherent and consistent "morality systems" (Keane, 2016;

Williams, 1985) that the question of individual agency has seemed primary. And it is also from this perspective that activists' challenges to morality systems have appeared to be radically freeing (Dave, 2011). However, as Keane (2016, p. 200) reminds us, activists do not only disrupt morality systems—they also often make them.

In order to bring the "unfreedoms" of activist ethics into view, I begin from a more open-ended analysis of social interaction, in which the relevant actors and trajectories of force remain to be discovered. Activists work upon the moral order, breaking down some standards and asserting others, but they do not do so alone nor, necessarily, of their own volition. As Keane notes, studying the accomplishment of ethical lives in social interaction helps draw attention to the ways in which even the most purposeful, agentic ethical projects are afforded by intersubjective encounters with others (Keane, 2016, pp. 33, 262). Rather than Foucauldian ethical subjects who shape themselves with the tools given them by social norms, my approach to activist subjectivity is inspired by the fellow-feelers of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Beginning from social interaction, Smith describes how ethical desires and demands are co-constructed in the company of others, putting the distinction between evaluation of oneself and evaluation by others under question (A. Smith, 2002, pp. 150-151). Thus, beginning from such an understanding of ethical subjectivity as grounded in intersubjectivity, I explore how some topics are made morally important while others are left aside, how some normative categories become obvious while others are suspect, and how some claims about justice become compelling while others fall short.

In order to give a full account of ethics in social interaction, I also find it necessary to consider not only how humans inspire, cajole, or convince one another to change, but also how their ethical views are shaped by the material world. In doing so, I build upon recent calls for an

expanded conceptualization of social interaction, in which non-human actors have a major role (Latour, 2004, 2005; Mol, 2002). However, I also attempt to address a problem that, as I argue in Chapter 7, has not been adequately treated in this literature: what are the implications of non-human agency for human ethical evaluation? In doing so, I do not concern myself with what sort of agency should be attributed to non-humans; what matters here are the effects of the material world upon human ethics. I give an account of activist ethics that is neither determined nor merely afforded by the material world, but that allows for the possibility that non-humans can intervene in human evaluations, inspiring visions for change, demanding recognition of injustice, or otherwise taking sides in human contention over how one ought to live.

As suggested earlier, undertaking analysis on these terms immediately makes the dichotomy between freedom and unfreedom awkward. If we find it troublesome to distinguish between evaluation of oneself and evaluation by others, how can we know if a project of self-cultivation is undertaken freely? If a certain circumstance strikes a person as unjust, should we count that as a free act of evaluation by that person or, instead, as an act by that circumstance upon that person? With regard to either question, any clear-cut distinction between freedom and unfreedom makes it difficult to account for both possibilities together and, moreover, to appreciate the varieties of "freeishness" and "unfreeishness" that might carry us down a particular moral path.

Nonetheless, even if we set aside these terms, it is worth retaining something of the concern motivating the freedom/unfreedom distinction for two reasons. First, because many activists involved in people's struggles were themselves so concerned with freedom. For those associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, like Faiza and Adarsh, the notion of activism as both expressing one's own freedom and promoting freedom for others was central. We must be able to account

for that aspect of activist experience. Second, and relatedly, some version of the freedom/unfreedom dichotomy will continue to be important to our analysis of the closely allied distinction between changing oneself and changing others.

Thus, in place of freedom/unfreedom, I propose that we take our starting point from the notions of creativity and persuasion. With these concepts, we can retain some of the notion of autonomous force suggested by "freedom" and some of the notion of external force in "unfreedom." In the manner I propose to use them here, however, creativity and persuasion are far more agnostic about the boundaries between internal and external, self and other, agency and determination. To be clear, my aim is not to make the case for creativity and persuasion as an overarching framework for describing activist ethics, let alone all human ethics, to supplant Foucauldian or Heideggerian frameworks proposed by others. Creativity and persuasion are, rather, only two mechanisms that might matter to ethical life. Indeed, although some versions of these mechanisms were important to activists involved in people's struggles, I will only occasionally find it helpful to describe activist ethics in these exact terms. Nonetheless, I find it helpful to introduce these concepts at this point because, taken together, they help to extricate us from the conceptual traps of the freedom/unfreedom question and start us down a more promising path.

Iris Murdoch, in a critique of the role of will in ethical life, draws an analogy between the pursuit of good and a certain account of artistic creativity (Murdoch, 1970, p. 59). A good painter, she claims, does not simply paint things as she likes, but as she apprehends them to be. Similarly, she argues, answering the question of how one should live should not simply be a matter of choosing what one wants, but rather of developing the ability to see clearly. She describes the development of such moral vision as a process of orienting and attending to an

external world (Murdoch, 1970, pp. 22, 23). Understood thus, creativity retains much of the striving and reflexive self-cultivation currently slotted under the rubric of freedom in much of the anthropology of ethics. But creativity is also a kind of obedience—an openness to influence from forces outside oneself (Murdoch, 1970, pp. 39, 40).

My aim in taking up these ideas is not to argue that the ethical lives of Kerala activists conform to Murdoch's theory, which at any rate is less a description of actual conduct than a program for how people ought to live (Murdoch, 1970, p. 45). Nonetheless, her notion of creativity is helpful for understanding the ethical dimension of social change, particularly change of the self, among activists in people's struggles. In adopting and enacting alternative ways of life, Faiza and Adarsh did not take themselves to be imposing their preferred moral framework upon a morally neutral world; they found the demand for change in the state of the world as they found it. The term most often used to describe this work was *anvēṣaṇam* ("inquiry," or "searching"), a practice often involving extensive first-hand experience, reading, and discussion. The logic of *anvēṣaṇam* implied that, with careful searching, the moral truth of matters could be found out; activist commitment was understood to grow out of a continual process of *anvēṣaṇam*. One young man, after several years of intervention in people's struggles, insisted to me that he was not yet an activist; he was still conducting *anvēṣaṇam*, still trying to learn, and even older activists often described ongoing inquiry as important to their work. Likewise, Faiza and Adarsh described Sunil's encounter with people's struggle activism—and the changes in him that resulted—in similar terms; as a growing apprehension of reality. To the extent that they sought to influence him, they understood this as a process of facilitating his attunement not to their own opinions and desires, but to the world which they all shared.

In taking up this notion of creativity, I do not mean to claim that Adarsh and Faiza, or any

of the activists I studied, were in a state of enlightenment, nor even that they consistently and sincerely sought the truth. Rather, I only mean to take seriously the *possibility* that the world can inspire or demand certain ethical positions, and that activists care about that possibility. Whether or not the world acts in such ways upon particular people, and whether or not those people are receptive to such forces, are questions to be explored empirically. I take the notion of creativity to open up such exploration alongside consideration of other forces, allowing for analysis of their interaction.

With Adarsh and Faiza's understanding of their influence on Sunil, our topic has already begun to pivot from changing the self to changing others. Persuasion, as I use the term here, contains much the same play between freedom and attunement as creativity, but shifts emphasis to outwardly directed force. To some it may seem strange to speak of persuasion as an exercise of force, insofar as it is generally understood as symbolic and not physical action. However, philosophers have long been concerned with the power of persuasion to direct the actions of others. Plato has Gorgias describe persuasion as the greatest of powers, which in the form of rhetorical speech "practically captures all powers and keeps them under its control" (Plato, 1979, pp. 19, 23), and it was the alleged misuse of this persuasive force that Socrates and Plato took issue with in their debate with Gorgias and other Sophists. More recently, the feminist philosopher Sally Gearhart (1979) has argued that, insofar as persuasion attempts to change others, it must be understood as a form of violence (see also, Foss & Griffin, 1995). And yet, as the Oxford English Dictionary has it, to persuade is to "induce to believe or accept," "to talk into," or "to coax out of"—actions upon others that are not unilateral, that require some participation, some acceptance, on the part of those we seek to influence ("Persuade," 2017). It is this element of cooperation that makes it difficult to speak of persuasion as a form of

domination, though it clearly has power to change others.

We commonly use the notion of persuasion in two distinct ways. We can persuade someone to do something, and we can persuade someone to take on a certain belief or ethical position. In speaking of moral persuasion, I am interested in the latter—not only of getting people to act as one wishes, but of convincing them, of winning them over. Empirically, however, there is often ambiguity between the two senses of persuasion. Sunil was persuaded to drop the plastic bag, but how can we know whether or not he was persuaded to oppose the use of such bags? In analyzing forces of persuasion, then, the relation between moral persuasion and other persuasive forces, which we might call political, remains to be explored.

This concept of moral persuasion is closely allied with the notion of moral reasoning found in some recent work in the anthropology of ethics (Hirschkind, 2006; Keane, 2016; Sykes, 2009). However, I choose to use "persuasion" both because of its emphasis on changing others and because of its comparative neutrality with regard to the means of influence. I take reasoning to indicate a normative ideal of persuasion, which selects certain persuasive techniques as those conducive to the discovery and promotion of truth. Activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* certainly regard their practices of inquiry (*anvēṣaṇam*) as moral reasoning, but for me to describe them in this way would suggest that I take activist practice to be just what the activists I study understand it to be. However, as with the notion of creativity, my aim is to make the workings of influence on others open to empirical exploration without deciding ahead of time what is there to be found.

Analyzing activist ethics in these terms, then, leaves room for consideration of how selves act upon themselves, how they act upon by others, and how they are acted upon by other people and things. In the first three chapters, I focus primarily on the various forces at play in the enactment of people's struggle. Chapter 2 examines conflicts between the Gandhamur Action

Council and solidarity organizers from the activist network associated with *Kēraḷīyam*. I show how the two groups' differing perspectives on the proper "scale" of the campaign against the gelatin factory amount to different ways of distributing ethical value. These different moral perspectives were crucial to the distinction between insiders and outsiders in the campaign and, by extension, to opinions about the proper roles of insider and outsiders. Although Action Council members and solidarity organizers shared the common goal of shutting down the gelatin factory, they situated this goal differently within their respective projects of social change.

Chapters 3 and 4 look more closely at these two ethico-political projects, which are each ways of realizing a normative vision of people's struggle. In Chapter 3, I describe how activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* constructed "people's struggle" as a type of political action. Although this was, to some extent, a process of imposing a normative framework upon the social world, it was also an encounter with qualities of the world that inspired, suggested, or constricted the work of typification. I analyze how *Kēraḷīyam* shaped the social world, but also how the social world entered into the activist imagination. In Chapter 4, I explore how the Gandhamur Action Council performed people's struggle through staging a variety of events in public roads. Here, we find the normative concept of "the people" caught up in a different contention of forces, as Action Council members deploy kinship and friendship, arguments and violence, displays of outrage and bodies blocking the street—all with the aim of harnessing the elusive force of public opinion.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 look more deeply at implications of activist ethics for anthropology's understanding of ethics works. Here, I am interested in how activists brought their own forces to bear on ethical life—holding one another accountable to certain practices, living consistently with particular values, or seeking to persuade non-activists about their views—but also with how

other forces bolstered, countered, or otherwise interacted with activist agency. In Chapter 5, I do a close analysis of an interaction in which the leader of an awareness-raising event berated others for eating cookies. Tracking the various responses of participants in the event, I show how the evaluative force of the original condemnation of cookies is extended and amplified by those who continue to eat them. I argue that this "stickiness" of ethical accountability in this instance was reducible neither to the authority of the group's leader nor to the reasons he gave for avoiding cookies, but took on a certain momentum of its own.

In Chapter 6, I show how making ethical change requires activists to take ethical positions at odds with those around them, which can create rifts in social relations. Activists struggle to be consistent despite these social consequences, but too much consistency can also isolate them, hindering their impact on others. At the heart of this problem, I argue, is the social force of evaluative alignment and disalignment. Engaging with literature from linguistic anthropology on evaluative stance as well as on the moral theory of Adam Smith, I argue that ethical stancetaking is uniquely difficult to segregate from other aspects of relationship. Thus, activists must often choose between maintaining consistency between their own ethical positions and compromising their principles in order to sustain relationships.

In Chapter 7, I examine the evidentiary practices by which the Gandhamur Action Council and its supporters attempted to persuade visiting supporters, government agencies, and the broader public that the effluents from the gelatin factory are unjust. I argue that both activists' and government researchers' uses of evidence presuppose implicit moral realist ideologies, and I compare these to two dominant moral epistemologies in anthropology. Ultimately, I argue that without some limited realist moral epistemology, it is difficult to make sense of the central role of contention in much ethical evaluation.

In Chapter 8, I conclude by returning to Sunil's story and the problem of the place of freedom in activist ethics. Having considered a wide range of forces that contribute to change of self and others, I track the complex dynamics of Sunil's freedoms and unfreedoms within his experience of becoming an activist. In doing so, I offer a picture not only of the limits of ethical freedom, but also of the unfreedom it can engender. It is this dual character of ethical freedom, I argue, that makes ethics a field of contention.

Chapter 2: Scales of Value

2.1 Making Insiders and Outsiders

Late in the hot season of 2013, there was a fish kill in the Neelajalam river, not far downstream from the gelatin factory in Gandhamur. Hundreds of thousands of glistening fish bodies bobbed along in the current, making their way past villages that the factory's noxious smell had never reached. Many of the people in these villages had not heard about the campaign to shut down the Gandhamur gelatin factory, but the stench of dead fish drew them out of their homes and into the roads. Jaison and Ravindranath were among the downstream residents who gathered at a major intersection, blocking traffic in protest of the smell. That day both men learned about the campaign for the first time and decided to become active participants. But in the ensuing months, their stories would take divergent trajectories; Jaison would increasingly be accepted as an insider by leaders of the campaign, while Ravindranath would gradually be marginalized. At last, in a heated meeting several months later, Ravindranath was expelled from the campaign and Jaison was inducted as an official member of the Gandhamur Action Council. In this chapter, I examine how these men ended up in such different positions and, more generally, what was at stake in the making of insiders and outsiders in Gandhamur.

How should insiders and outsiders be distinguished from one another in community organizing and what are their appropriate roles in the organizing process? This question is arguably fundamental to community organizing, but it is answered differently by different organizing traditions. In Kerala, as in the US, the dominant view is that organizing should be

community driven; outsiders may work in solidarity, providing resources and guidance, but insiders should define aims and make major decisions. However, in the Gandhamur campaign, the distinctions between insiders and outsiders were sometimes fuzzy, and roles became a matter of controversy.

As in many other environmental campaigns, insiders and outsiders in the Gandhamur campaign were primarily distinguished from one another in spatial terms, as locals and non-locals. As Jaison's and Ravindranath's stories illustrate, however, being local or non-local was not merely a matter of residence; in that sense, both men were insiders and outsiders in approximately equal measure. Situating these men's stories within the broader controversy over insider and outsider roles in Gandhamur, this chapter shows that what made Jaison a local and Ravindranath a non-local were the ways each man aligned himself with conflicting perspectives on the importance of local belonging. Insiders and outsiders in the Gandhamur campaign, I find, were distinguished by different ways of measuring, or "scaling" (Carr & Lempert, 2016), the value of localness that entailed mutually opposed perspectives on the purpose of the campaign. Such tensions, I argue, are not adequately addressed by appeals to community self-determination or blanket formulas for appropriate insider and outsider roles.

Jaison's and Ravindranath's stories are key threads of a larger narrative of attempted collaboration between insiders and outsiders in the campaign against the gelatin factory. After the fish kill, the campaign received unprecedented involvement from a network of environmental and social activists who regularly intervene in people's struggles across the state. The Gandhamur campaign had always self-identified as a people's struggle, and local organizers had long been in contact with some of these activists, including the editors of *Kēraḷīyam*. Indeed, in early visits to Gandhamur, local leaders had complained to me about the relative lack of

coverage their campaign received from *Kēraḷīyam* in comparison with some other people's struggles and had expressed desire for greater involvement from activists associated with the magazine. Now, collaboration between the Action Council and solidarity organizers greatly intensified, with several of these activists residing as guests in the homes of Action Council members in order to work full time on the campaign. Soon after an official "solidarity committee" (*aikyadārḍhya samiti*) was formed to promote and coordinate the participation of activists from across the state on behalf of the campaign, and a solidarity convention was planned.

Ravindranath was centrally but ambiguously positioned in this collaboration. He had been involved in environmental activism before, though never in people's struggles, and had some friends among the *Kēraḷīyam* crowd. During the early months of the collaboration, he led much of the day-to-day organizing in Gandhamur while also working as a liaison between the Action Council and the solidarity committee. Jaison's influence, on the other hand, was considered suspect by many solidarity organizers. He had long been involved in politics as a member of the Congress party,¹⁵ which was in power at the time and was perceived as negligent of the Gandhamur campaign's demands. Nonetheless, among Action Council members, many of whom were members of the Congress party, he was generally seen as bringing high-level contacts and political clout to the campaign.

By the time of the solidarity convention, it was clear that the collaboration was not going

¹⁵ While generally considered centrist at the national level, in Kerala the Congress party is the more right-leaning of two dominant parties, the other being the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM. As at the national level, Kerala has a parliamentary system of government, which is generally controlled by either the Congress-led UDF coalition or the CPM-led LDF coalition. The UDF was in power during the bulk of my fieldwork, including the period during which the events described in this chapter transpired.

well. About 250 activists from other parts of the state came, but only fifteen or so Action Council members showed up, even though the convention was held at a school just outside of Gandhamur. By my own observation, it appeared that the collaboration was strained by conflict over key aspects of how the campaign was run. And indeed, Action Council members and solidarity organizers privately complained about conflicts over many of the same issues—including gender roles, the facilitation of meetings, and involvement of politicians like Jaison—but from different perspectives. Ravindranath's expulsion and Jaison's induction marked a turning point in this conflict, a moment in which local organizers reasserted control over the campaign. Thereafter, most of the non-local activists stopped coming to Gandhamur, and collaboration ceased.

In this chapter, I examine the conflicts over organizing processes that troubled the Gandhamur collaboration, looking closely at how Action Council members and solidarity organizers talked about the campaign and about each other. Within this analysis, I return to Jaison's and Ravindranath's stories in order to shed light on how distinctions between insiders and outsiders were made. I find that what troubled the collaboration in Gandhamur was a fundamental disagreement about how to situate the gelatin factory campaign within "people's struggle." This disagreement can usefully be described in terms of different spatialized scales of value; both groups positioned the Gandhamur campaign as a local instance within the broader, geographically dispersed politics of people struggle, but they disagreed in the relative importance they attributed to localness vis-à-vis broadness. Because of this difference in perspective, local Action Council members and solidarity organizers shared a common goal of shutting down the factory, but they did not share a common cause, or further ethical purpose in relation to which this goal was understood to be important. This case illustrates how scales of value can help us to

understand what is at stake in insider/outsider distinctions in community organizing and how those distinctions can lead to conflict. Although there is no single way of resolving such conflict, sensitivity to the ethical and political implications of scalar perspectives can aid organizers in collaborating across insider/outsider distinctions.

2.2 Insiders and Outsiders in Kerala's People's Struggles

Studies of environmental movements have documented the importance of spatial categories, particularly distinctions between locals and their others, in this form of politics (Giugni & Grasso, 2015; Rootes, 1999, 2007, 2013; Tsing, 2005). An important insight of this literature has been that sorting actors and events into such categories is often part of the organizing process (Choy, 2005; Towers, 2000). Chaskin makes a similar point with respect to the concepts of "community" and "neighborhood" in American neighborhood organizing, in which distinctions of local belonging have often been central (Chaskin, 1997). According to Chaskin, the boundaries of neighborhoods and other local communities are not simply geographic; these are social boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, between insiders and outsiders. The politics of drawing these boundaries is often central to the organizing process.

Likewise, distinctions between locals and nonlocals are central to the politics of people's struggles in Kerala. As noted in Chapter 1, many struggles are conflicts over environmental hazards or access to resources, but there is no unifying people's struggle topic or issue. For example, campaigns to ban bars in predominately Muslim regions are also commonly included in the category. Sunny, the managing editor of *Kēraḷīyam*, explained that this categorization is controversial because opposition to alcohol is contrary to many readers' own views. Nonetheless, he and Adarsh held that these campaigns were people's struggles because they represent the

views of those who belong to those places. Thus, the strongest point of consistency in the politics of people's struggle is that the "people" are understood to be the people of a particular place. What people's struggles share is that they make claims on the state based on belonging to a place. Thus, the map of people's struggles in Figure 2, originally published in *Kēraḷīyam*, depicts each one as located in a place, as a dot, but also as partaking of a broader type of organizing and a common claim to representing the people. Each people's struggle has its locals; they are the people of people's struggles.

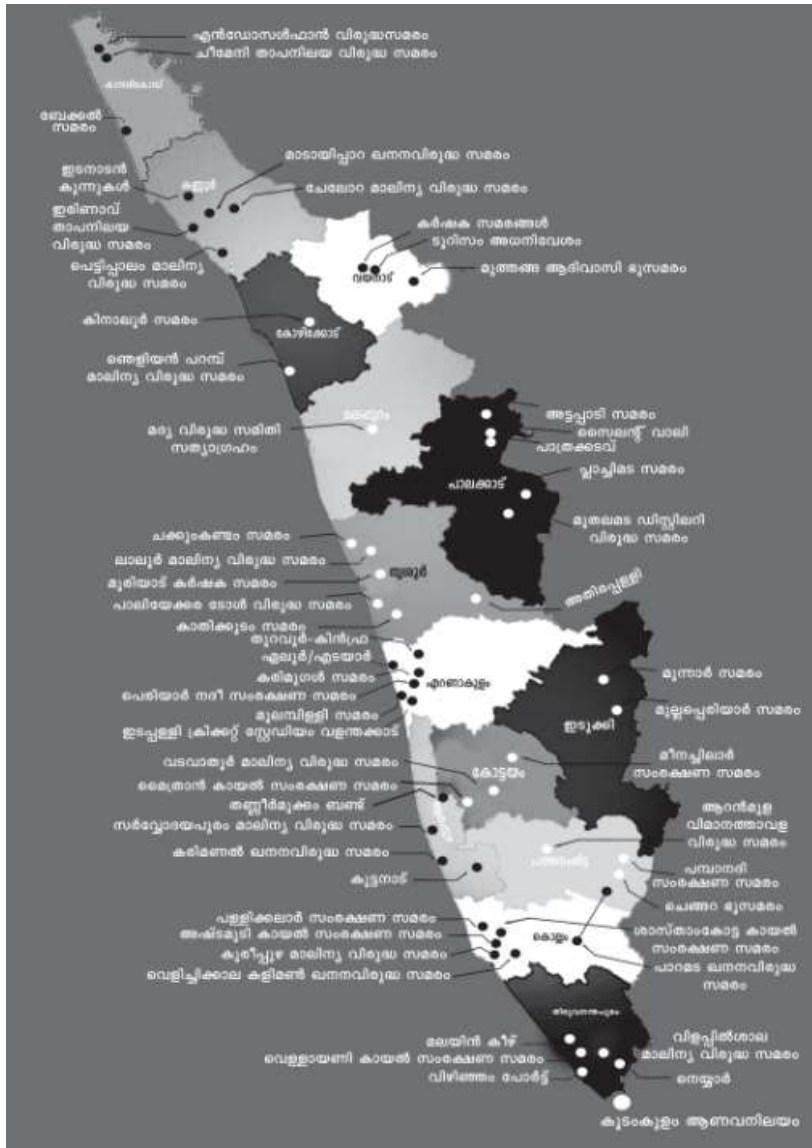


Figure 2: : Map of "people's struggles" from *Kēraḷīyam* magazine (8/2012)

Distinguishing insiders and outsiders is not only part of organizing local communities, but any community. The concept of community always includes such distinctions or exclusions, setting apart those who belong from those who do not (Young, 1986). Within community organizing, the position of the organizer with respect to these distinctions has been treated in diverse and contrasting ways. In both Alinsky-style and consensus organizing, two traditions often juxtaposed in the literature, the organizer is generally assumed to be an outsider who moves from community to community, collaborating with locals (Alinsky, 1971; Beck & Eichler, 2000; Pruger & Specht, 1969). Similarly, some scholars have distinguished between "leaders" and "organizers" as appropriate roles for insiders and outsiders, respectively (Staples, 2000). In other traditions, the ideal is for insiders to take the primary organizing roles. This has been the dominant position in multicultural organizing in the US, in which distinctions between ethnic or racial insiders and outsiders have been particularly salient (Bradshaw, Soifer, & Gutierrez, 1994; Gutierrez, Alvarez, Nemon, & Lewis, 1996; Rivera & Erlich, 1992). Consider the diagram in Figure 3, in which Rivera and Erlich divide relative insiders and outsiders into three concentric rings designating primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of appropriate "organizer contact," or participation in key organizing processes (1992, p. 11). Here, insider/outsider distinctions are critical. How you should participate is proportional to how much you belong.

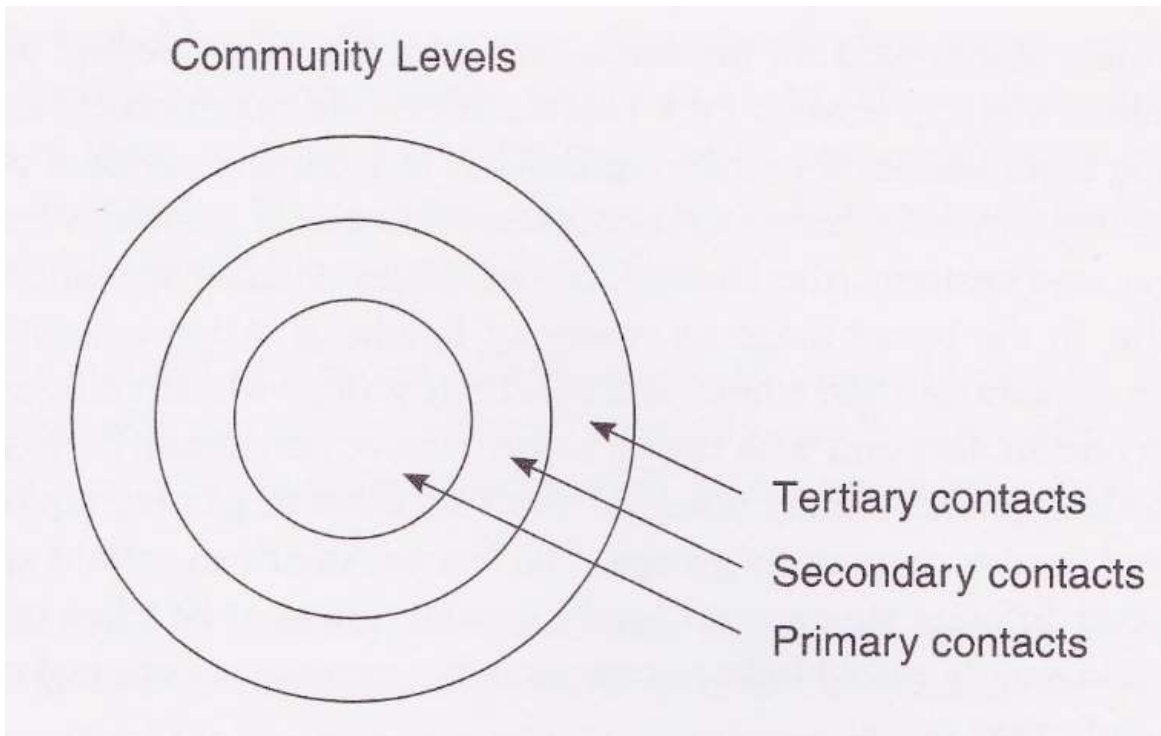


Figure 3: "Organizer's Contact Intensity and Influence" (Rivera & Erlich, 1992, p. 11)

Not all approaches to organizing foreground insider/outsider distinctions. In his letter from Birmingham Jail, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. famously argued that when it came to the pursuit of racial justice in America, there were no outsiders (King, 1997). One solidarity organizer I encountered made a similar point, arguing that because environmental hazards like the pollution from the gelatin factory affect Kerala rivers, they are equally an issue for all Malayalis. Such claims do not necessarily mean that insider/outsider distinctions are not in play—King's letter was a response to those who claimed he was an outsider in Birmingham—but it is certainly possible to imagine organizing without community—that is, as King suggests, to refuse to distinguish insiders from outsiders. However, because the gelatin factory campaign and other people's struggles are localized by definition, distinguishing locals from non-locals is inherently important to this form of organizing.

In Malayalam, members of the Gandhamur Action Council were referred to interchangeably as *nāṭṭukār* (people of a particular place), *janāṅṅal* (the people), or *samarakār* (people of struggle) by both themselves and solidarity organizers. And as noted earlier, the action councils are generally considered the primary actors in people's struggles. However, solidarity organizers also take intervention in people's struggles as their major mode of political action. In Malayalam, these activists are referred to as *pravarttakar* ("organizers" or "activists")¹⁶, a term that was mutually exclusive with the terms used for local organizers. Many solidarity organizers are producers of alternative and mainstream media, and they actively work to frame people's struggles as contributors to a larger movement for social transformation. In this sense, the map in Figure 1 also exemplifies the essential role of solidarity organizers in people struggles. They are not depicted anywhere on the map, but they are the ones who made the map.

While the notion of Action Council members as spatial insiders is straightforward, it may not seem clear why solidarity organizers are necessarily outsiders. This is one part of the problem this chapter undertakes to address. For the moment, however, it is worth noting that while the term *pravarttakar* does not mean non-local in all contexts, it takes that meaning here by contrast to the terms that designate local organizers.¹⁷ I use the term "solidarity" to highlight this defining contrast—to work in solidarity is to ally one's efforts with a person or group while also taking them as other (Wright, 2016). The Gandhamur campaign drew support from many

¹⁶ The term *pravarttakar* could be most literally glossed as "workers" or, simply "doers." It is commonly used for people doing political work (e.g., as a member of a political party) or social work (e.g., as someone with an MSW), not for manual labor or office work. Often, solidarity organizers were referred to specifically as *paristhitika* (environmental) *pravarttakar* or *samūhya* (social) *pravarttakar* to distinguish them from *rāṣṭrīya pravarttakar* (political party workers).

¹⁷ Within the discourse of people's struggle, this contrast was ubiquitous. Notably, even the solidarity organizer who made the MLK-esque argument that there are no outsiders in people's struggle still used the contrasting terms *samarakār* and *pravarttakar* in making his case.

non-resident individuals and groups (e.g., representatives of religious organizations, political parties, unions) who were not solidarity organizers. What set solidarity organizers apart from these other outsiders was their role in defining and perpetuating people's struggle as a form of political action (see Chapter 3).

Like Rivera and Erlich's diagram, the distinction between locals and solidarity organizers separates different kinds of organizers according to levels of belonging. But in Gandhamur, the appropriate roles associated with these different kinds of organizers were not always clear. Following the fishkill, for example, solidarity organizers temporarily residing in the village participated in key decision-making meetings even though they were not technically members of the local Action Council. The positions of Ravindranath and Jaison were both particularly ambiguous. Initially, Ravindranath was given a central leadership role working closely with Vijayan, the head of the Action Council. He used his connections with the solidarity organizer network to build support for the campaign, but in his interactions with them, he self-identified as a representative of locals. Jaison's public role was initially much more peripheral, but he also participated in some decision-making meetings. As noted earlier, his status as a Congress politician led many solidarity organizers and a few Action Council members to suspect him as a hijacker. In short, both men were neither wholly on the outside nor wholly on the inside. As tensions grew between the Action Council and the solidarity committee, however, the boundaries of appropriate roles became increasingly important. By examining the roots of these tensions, we can understand what came to matter most in distinguishing insiders and outsiders in Gandhamur and why Ravindranath was gradually excluded while Jaison's role became more central.

2.3 Consciousness and Cause

The solidarity organizers who arrived in Gandhamur following the fishkill quickly

involved themselves in the everyday work of the campaign—coordinating social media, participating in marches and roadblocks, making speeches, joining strategy meetings, and fasting. Through their involvement, they sought to influence organizing processes in line with their own normative understanding of people's struggle. Among other things, they sought to hold more regular and transparent meetings, resist cooptation by party politicians, and increase the participation of women in decision-making and leadership roles. They had an impact in some of these areas. For example, nightly public meetings soon became a fixture of the campaign.

The head of the Action Council, Vijayan, and other local organizers resisted these changes. For example, many of the nightly meetings never happened because Vijayan, whom both Action Council members and solidarity organizers acknowledged to be the central player in all campaign activities, never showed up. Likewise, an attempt by solidarity organizers to organize a committee of local women, which would operate independently of the Action Council, was quickly stifled by Vijayan, who claimed it was impractical. Again and again, solidarity organizers complained about the way things were run and attempted to institute new processes. Again and again, Vijayan and other Action Council members undermined those processes.

Solidarity organizers often framed their concerns about the Gandhamur campaign in terms of a lack of local "consciousness" (*bōdham* or *bōdhyam*). For example, Dhanya, the convener of the official Gandhamur "solidarity committee" (*aikyadārdhya samiti*) described efforts to organize the independent women's committee as an attempt at raising consciousness. When this and other attempts to influence the campaign failed, Dhanya explained:

"[Locals] are not organizing for a *cause* [English]...For example, if they offered to take the factory's waste somewhere else, the people in Gandhamur would agree to that very

quickly...but this waste will make the same problems there that it is making in Gandhamur. But these people still don't have that consciousness yet. I see that as this struggle's biggest weakness."

Here, Dhanya argued that the consciousness locals lacked was consciousness of the ways in which the goal of shutting down the gelatin factory fit into larger conflicts over environmental resources. In her view, locals in Gandhamur lacked consciousness of these larger conflicts because, she asserted, they would be willing to allow the company to move the pollution to some other village. For her, this demonstrated that they did not recognize their own plight as equivalent with injustices elsewhere. Without such recognition, locals were not working for a cause. Dhanya described "cause" as the "the motor inside me, the aim." Without a cause, she argued, the campaign was weak and unlikely to succeed.

For Dhanya and other solidarity organizers, to be conscious was to approach the campaign from a particular scalar perspective. Studies of environmental politics have employed the concept of scale in examining how categories like "local," "regional," and "global" are socially constructed (Gupta, 2014; Neumann, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2004; Towers, 2000). Anthropologist Anna Tsing defines scale as "the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary" (Tsing 2005: 58). As Dhanya explained, to be conscious is to see the campaign from a certain scalar vantage point, a perspective from which the pollution in Gandhamur and pollution in another village are equivalent. To have a cause is to configure one's aims in this same way—that is, to pursue people's struggle in any particular place as part of people's struggle generally. Moreover, it is worth noting here that, in Malayalam, the idiom of "raising consciousness" has a dual sense of

offering knowledge and correcting someone's actions.¹⁸ Thus, as used here, consciousness already includes not only a certain scalar perspective or understanding, but also an ethical orientation to action at this scale; consciousness implies cause.

A glance back at the map in Figure 2, which was published in a magazine by and for solidarity organizers, suggests one way of imagining the scalar perspective of "consciousness." Here, the campaign against the Gandhamur gelatin factory is one dot in an array of equally-sized dots arranged on a plane viewed from above, a bird's-eye view. Like Dhanya's argument about consciousness and cause, the map constructs a vantage point from which the Gandhamur campaign is equivalent with other people's struggles. For solidarity organizers, such geographic equivalence is essential to representing people's struggles as part of a "broader" social movement.

The concept of scaling can also help to make sense of solidarity organizers' descriptions of gender roles or nightly meetings as a matter of consciousness. While much of the literature on scale focuses on spatial categories, Carr and Lempert (2016) point out that not all scales are spatial and that scalar perspectives are often constructed in multiple dimensions at once. Indeed, Carr and Fisher (2016) argue that interscaling, or "drawing connections between disparate scalable qualities so that they come to reinforce each other," is one of the ways that a particular

¹⁸ "Raising consciousness" in Malayalam conflates two distinct verbal clauses, "*bōdhavalkarikkuka*" and "*bōdhyappētuttuka*." For much of my fieldwork, I believed that these two terms were equivalent because solidarity organizers, in their talk of raising consciousness, used them interchangeably. However, in analyzing transcripts, I came to realize that local organizers used *bōdhyappētuttuka*, but hardly ever said *bōdhavalkarikkuka*. In consulting informants about these two terms explicitly, I was told that although they technically have the same dictionary meaning, *bōdhyappētuttuka* has more of a sense of correcting someone's actions, of right and wrong. The other term *bōdhavalkarikkuka* is more about simply offering new knowledge or information.

scalar perspective can be rendered compelling (see also, Philips, 2016). When Dhanya described both the dominance of males in decision making and a willingness to move the pollution elsewhere in terms of a lack of consciousness, she made just such an analogic connection between two ways of situating the campaign within "broader" projects of social transformation. A dearth of female leadership in the campaign is to widespread gender inequality as pollution in Gandhamur is to pollution anywhere.

Dhanya's scaling of the Gandhamur campaign should also be understood in the context of the ethical import many activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* give to apparently "small" aspects of everyday life—the scalar practices at the root of Sunil's plastic bag troubles. As I describe in Chapter 7, many activists involved with people's struggles were also, to varying degrees, committed to taking each person's body (especially with regard to its habits of consumption) as a battleground in struggles with corporate capitalism, environmental degradation, Western imperialism, and other mechanisms of injustice. Likewise, in Chapter 3, I describe how activists attempted to model the changes they hoped to create in society—such as gender equality—in their relations to one another. These practices scale social change in a manner parallel to the "consciousness" Dhanya describes—in which each campaign is an equivalent site within a broader political project, and in which broad social change (the "cause") is pursued through intervention in a multiplicity of such "local" sites.

Dhanya's discussion of cause and consciousness indicates one probable factor in how Ravindranath became an outsider. When Ravindranath came to Gandhamur, he came as someone from downstream, but he also came with a cause. Even though he positioned himself as a local liaison to solidarity organizers, rather than as one of them, his participation sometimes implied a scale of social action similar to that associated with "consciousness." For example, it was often

he who attempted to gather everyone for the nightly meetings. Ravindranath was sympathetic to many of the solidarity organizers' complaints. Solidarity organizers saw him as a local ally, but it was this very alliance that arguably made him less local. While Vijayan was butting heads with solidarity organizers, Ravindranath collaborated with Dhanya and others in organizing the solidarity convention, which, in keeping with solidarity organizers' scalar perspective on the campaign, was titled "Gandhamur is Kerala." Nonetheless, at the time, Ravindranath still saw himself as a local participant; he described himself as the only local representative to speak at that convention. A few weeks later, Vijayan and other local leaders expelled him from the campaign.

2.4 For the *Nāṭ*

Sunitha, one of the most active local participants in the Gandhamur campaign, once told me about a "consciousness raising" effort she had attended many years before. It was a small seminar at the village library and, like Dhanya's effort to form the independent women's committee, its aim had been to mobilize local women. Sunitha credited it with giving her the new consciousness that motivated her to get involved in the campaign:

"They gave us a class explaining all of the science behind this. So after getting this awareness (*bōdhyam*) is when the mothers here began to come to the forefront of the struggle... After that, we had awareness about the bad effects on our village (*nāṭ*), and we mothers joined [the Action Council] in order to save our village (*nāṭ*)."

One might say that through this seminar Sunitha gained both consciousness and cause. But this is not consciousness and cause in Dhanya's terms. Sunitha recounted that the awareness she and other mothers gained was of bad effects on "our village," motivating them to save "our village." In fact, the term she uses here does not translate neatly as "our village." *Nāṭ* is a deictic

term with person-centric meaning: the *nāṭ* is the place where one belongs, with belonging being a relative property (Daniel, 1984, pp. 68-70). Figure 4 is a visual representation of the shifting reference of some common uses of *nāṭ*. If in the US, a Malayali might use the term *nāṭ* to mean India. If in Delhi, it would likely mean Kerala; if in Kerala, one's village. Not necessarily the village where one lives, but the village where one belongs—usually the village of one's family origins. By describing her consciousness in this idiom of nested spaces of belonging, Sunitha distinguished her *nāṭ*-centric "cause" from the geographically-dispersed social transformation of Dhanya and other solidarity organizers. She and other Gandhamur mothers were organizing for the *nāṭ*.



Figure 4: Diagram of shifting meaning of "nāṭ"

I have called Sunitha's commitment to the *nāṭ* her "cause," but we might also see this *nāṭ*-centric framing of the campaign as support for Dhanya's contention that locals do not have a cause. Near the end of my fieldwork, many months after the solidarity organizers had withdrawn from Gandhamur, there was a rumor going around that the gelatin factory might be moved to Gujarat, a state in northern India. In an interview, Vijayan, the convener of the local Action Council, talked about this new development as a victory for the campaign. He spoke with anticipation about putting the struggle behind him and taking up a new life as a farmer. When I asked him about the Action Council's stand with regard to moving the pollution elsewhere, he said simply, "Our stand is that here, in the circumstances of our village, this factory cannot be allowed. Where they'll take it or what they'll do with it tomorrow is not our issue." This explicit rejection of equivalence between opposing pollution in Gandhamur and opposing pollution elsewhere would seem to confirm Dhanya's claim that local organizers lacked "consciousness" and a "cause."

From the *nāṭ*-centric perspective elaborated by Sunitha and other Action Council members, however, the Action Council's stand looks very different. I found these differences to be particularly salient in how Action Council members talked about responsibility and agency in organizing. Many asserted a *nāṭ*-centric approach to responsibility that contrasted with solidarity organizers' approach to people's struggles as equivalent. For example, one active local organizer said he did not consider it his job to offer support to other people's struggles in other places, but expressed a strong sense of responsibility to work on behalf of fellow villagers who lived on nearby riverbanks and suffered the worst of the pollution. Such framings of responsibility were often tied to statements about the spatial limits of the Action Council's agency—that is, the extent of change they took the campaign to be capable of effecting. For example, in describing

why he rejected the moniker of environmentalist (*paristhitika pravarttakan*) often used for solidarity organizers, Vijayan said that his heavy involvement in the Gandhamur campaign rendered him incapable of working on other issues or campaigns, even though he was interested in them. As with responsibility, Action Council members contrasted their *nāt*-centric agency with the geographically-dispersed agency of the solidarity organizers.

Sunitha and others asserted a scaling for the campaign that ran counter to solidarity organizers' attempts to encompass it in efforts for "broader" social transformation. What is most striking about Sunitha's description of her new "cause" is how it re-scales the "breadth" of solidarity organizers' interventions. From a *nāt*-centric vantage point, breadth only distances solidarity organizers from the campaign's core purpose. Sunitha marginalizes solidarity organizers even as she credits them with facilitating her new awareness of the pollution's "bad effects on our *nāt*." Solidarity organizers cannot claim such *nāt*-centric awareness. They might claim awareness of effects on Gandhamur, but they cannot claim to know the effects on Gandhamur as *nāt*. Nor can they take up the cause of saving Gandhamur as *nāt*. Campaigning at this scale is only available to those who belong.

Jaison employed a similar *nāt*-centric scaling for his own involvement in Gandhamur, particularly with regard to responsibility. Many solidarity organizers had been suspicious of Jaison's party affiliation, and some said that he had been on the wrong side of another people's struggle—a protest of a proposed dam a bit further upstream on the same river. When I broached these criticisms in an interview, Jaison did not deny them, but instead nullified them through a deft re-scaling. He openly avowed that his participation in the Gandhamur campaign was strictly tied to the impact of the pollution on himself and his community. Likewise, in speeches and at Action Council meetings, Jaison positioned himself as one motivated by *nāt*-centric aims, rooted

in his encounter with the dead fish months before. Despite solidarity organizers' criticisms, nearly all members of the Action Council told me that they found this persuasive. Just as Ravindranath became an outsider because he oriented his work according to the scales of solidarity, so Jaison becomes a local because he scaled his intervention as *nāṭ*-centric.

2.5 Same Goal, Different Causes

Contrary to Dhanya's view, the locals had a cause—but their cause was not the solidarity organizers' cause. Here, building on Dhanya's use of the term, I understand a cause to be some further ethical purpose in relation to which a campaign goal is important—an ethical motive for pursuing a goal. Action Council members and solidarity organizers constructed the goal of shutting down the gelatin factory as important in relation to different and ultimately incompatible causes, and these differences had implications for their approaches to organizing. From the solidarity organizers' perspective, leadership of women and democratic meetings were mechanisms for promoting gender equality and democracy, respectively, and alliances with party politicians were taken to hinder broader challenges to the political system. But Action Council members did not take themselves to be responsible for nor capable of making these kinds of change.

As a scalar distinction, the difference between locals' and solidarity organizers' causes is well-represented by the contrast between Figures 2 and 4. From a bird's-eye view (Figure 2), all particular struggles are encompassed by and equivalent within the broader politics of people's struggle and its aims of social transformation. The solidarity organizers move from struggle to struggle seeking to further these broader aims, and any one struggle is valued insofar as it contributes to their vision for geographically-dispersed transformation of a wide range of social hierarchies. In local organizers' use of the term *nāṭ*, we have another kind of map (Figure 4).

Here also, the relative importance of goals is diagrammed spatially, but space has a community-centric shape. The gelatin factory campaign is still situated within a "broader" politics, but the perspective is one of core and periphery (to repurpose a famous scale (Wallerstein, 1974)). The campaign goal is important because it is situated at the center, the focus of responsibility. Campaigns in other places, or efforts to address broader social concerns, are beside the point.

Note that both diagrams represent scales of ethical value, and it is the spatial configuration of value, or importance, that makes them incompatible. In purely geographic terms, as two ways of mapping space, there is no necessary disagreement between them. We might imagine, for example, a map of all people's struggles similar to that in Figure 2, but within which each dot is a set of concentric circles similar to that in Figure 4; each dot is a *nāṭ* for somebody. But because these are scales of relative value, framing the importance of the campaign from a birds-eye perspective commits one to a cause that is opposed to the *nāṭ*-centric view of cause. One cannot have it both ways.

These scales of value can also be understood as different perspectives on the insider/outsider relationship itself. As ways of diagramming people's struggle, both depict "the people" as localized, but they configure the relation between the local and the non-local differently. For the solidarity organizers, being local puts the people on the map, positioning them as claimants and contributors within a broader cause. For the local organizers, being local puts the people at the center, and the "broadness" of the solidarity organizers' vision for people's struggle only makes it more peripheral. In other words, like Rivera and Erlich's diagram in Figure 3, these can be taken as views of the appropriate roles of relative insiders and outsiders in the organizing process. These two scalar perspectives do not stipulate precisely who ought to do what, but they are opposed in the importance they give to insider and outsider roles. It is not hard

to see how this difference would contribute to conflict between the Gandhamur Action Council and the solidarity committee.

The difference between the configuration of these two scales is at the heart of our story about Jaison and Ravindranath. Despite being seen by solidarity organizers as an instrument of the ruling political party (i.e., an outsider of the worst sort), Jaison managed to position himself as one of "the people" as far as local organizers were concerned, and he did this by framing his motives as having the same scalar configuration as their own. Ravindranath, on the other hand, came to be seen by both Action Council members and solidarity organizers as working at a scale configured with a birds-eye perspective. Moreover, the two groups' different scales of purpose led them to value Ravindranath's contribution in opposite ways. Thus, Ravindranath became a casualty in the broader conflict over whose approach to the campaign would prevail.

To what extent are these conflicting perspectives specific to the cultural and sociopolitical context of the Gandhamur campaign? Malayalam categories like *nāṭ* are clearly important to the insider/outsider dynamics described here, and ethnographic studies of Indian environmental justice campaigns describe tensions in collaborations between locals and non-locals that resonate with the Gandhamur case (Baviskar, 2004; Fortun, 2001). Nonetheless, local/non-local collaboration also appears to be characteristic of environmental movements globally (Rootes, 2013; Tsing, 2005), not to mention other place-based organizing traditions (Fisher, 1994). While the relevant scales of ethical value will likely differ, there is good reason to think that scaling would be important to insider/outsider collaboration in other contexts.

To recognize the full relevance of scaling to insider/outsider distinctions, we need to look beyond spatial scales. Consider Figure 3 once more. Rivera and Erlich's diagram presents a particular scalar perspective on ethnic belonging, similar to the *nāṭ*-centric perspective of

Gandhamur Action Council members. This is a normative model, used to make a case about how organizing should be done. What the analysis above should help us see is that this is not the only way of scaling insider/outsider relationships. Different scalar configurations would provide different normative perspectives on the relative importance of insider and outsider roles and purposes. Whether these scales are used to organize relationships based on space, ethnicity, or some other criteria, they are always also scales of value—not only models of the world, but also normative models for the world (Geertz, 1973, pp. 94-95).

Is one of these perspectives better than the other? As noted at the outset, different organizing traditions have addressed this question in different ways. In addition, the Gandhamur case illustrates that even within a single tradition there may be multiple irreconcilable positions. In American social work, one might argue that the core ethical principle of community "self-determination" (Hardina, 2004) makes resolution of such conflicts more straightforward; whatever their perspective, non-locals should accede to local purposes. However, it is also true that practices of consciousness-raising are a major feature of American organizing traditions (e.g., Sarachild, 1970/2000). And as in India, the desired forms of consciousness emphasize understanding of broader social issues and commitment to the purposes they entail.¹⁹ Our analysis of the conflicts of scalar perspective in Gandhamur highlights a tension between these two points of view, but it does not tell us how to resolve that tension. Indeed, it may be that such tensions are inherent to the different positions set up by the very process of distinguishing insiders from outsiders. Rather than proposing a wholesale solution, I recommend that attending

¹⁹ Indeed, Indian and American practices of consciousness raising share a common genealogy. Concern with transforming consciousness as a part of social transformation has precedent in Indian philosophy as well as in Marxist, Freirean, and feminist influences on Indian organizing (Halliburton, 2002; Steur, 2011).

to scalar perspectives in organizing can help us to better assess the stakes in insider/outsider distinctions, improving our ability to negotiate such tensions, whether or not they can be overcome.

2.6 The Shape of Space

Not long after the fish kill that brought Ravindranath, Jaison, and many solidarity organizers to Gandhamur, participants in the campaign had a major clash with police in which many were injured. The police confiscated cameras and cell phones and deleted nearly all of the photos and video of the violence, but in the small amount of footage that remains, Action Council members and solidarity organizers can be seen shouting, tussling, and ultimately fleeing side-by-side. This event brought a new wave of support from solidarity organizers. But ultimately, it also heightened existing tensions in their collaboration with the Action Council. The company, the police, labor unions, and some newspapers framed the violence as instigated by "extremists" (*tīvravādika!*) from outside the village. Solidarity organizers demanded that the Gandhamur Action Council publicly refute these claims, especially after one politician close to Vijayan implied that they were true. But although Vijayan acknowledged these claims were false, he was not as vocal about it as solidarity organizers would have liked.

There are many ways one might interpret Vijayan's "silence" regarding these accusations, but many solidarity organizers later described this as the beginning of the end of the collaboration. Some described Vijayan's failure to adequately refute these accusations as an intensely painful betrayal of their relationships with the local people. They acknowledged that they were outsiders (and many acknowledged being "extremists" as well), but they wanted Vijayan to affirm that locals and solidarity organizers had endured the blows of police batons together. In particular, they wanted him to stand up to the offending politician—who, like Jaison,

was a member of the ruling party. For them, Vijayan's failure to correct this politician was taken as a sign that the local Action Council had, in fact, been hijacked.

Claims by campaign opponents about outsiders in Gandhamur exacerbated already existing tensions within the campaign. The conflict between insider and outsider perspectives had been primarily a conflict over aspects of the organizing process, but now it also became a conflict over how the campaign would position itself within a broader public discourse about insiders and outsiders in people's struggle. Claims about meddling outsiders in Gandhamur implicitly asserted a normative scalar configuration that circumscribed the legitimate representatives of the people to particular locales, while non-localized mobilization was rendered "extremist" and targeted for repression. Thus, an organizer's personal vision was not the only thing at stake in claims about the scalar configuration of purposes or roles; there were also tactical choices to be made, responding to other claims within a contentious political arena. And organizers were far from the loudest or most authoritative claimants.

The tactical implications of accusations by the campaign's opponents point to an additional reason that there is no single best way of scaling insider and outsider roles: scales of similar configuration can be employed to very different ends. In opponents' claims about outsiders, we have a normative scaling of "the local people" that is very compatible with *nāṭ*-centric organizing. Perhaps this is one reason that Vijayan did not make more effort to oppose these claims. But here, *nāṭ*-centric scales were turned against the campaign, threatening to isolate it from outside support, or even to undermine its legitimacy as a people's struggle altogether. Because scales can be repurposed in such ways, decisions about the best scale cannot be made once and for all.

In this chapter, I have shown how insiders and outsiders in an environmental campaign

were distinguished by different perspectives on the shape, the moral bent, of space. As we saw with Jaison and Ravindranath, different scalar perspectives can become a litmus test for sorting insiders from outsiders. But the same scales of value involved in insider/outsider distinctions can also be important to sorting legitimate campaigns from illegitimate. This makes the stakes in understanding potential conflicts in scalar perspective that much higher. Paying attention to scaling can help organizers to understand where others—both collaborators and opponents—are coming from and to assess the ethical and tactical implications of different ways seeing the world. For insiders and outsiders, understanding the other's point of view might not lead to any shared perspective, but it does offer a starting point for finding ways to work together.

Thus, we have seen how different evaluative frameworks entailed divergent approaches to organizing processes and tactics, ultimately making collaboration between solidarity organizers and Action Council members unsustainable. Within this analysis, the activists' different scalar perspectives appear as one kind of causal force driving the pursuit of environmental and social change. In the next two chapters, I follow the activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* and the Gandhamur Action Council down their divergent paths, exploring how each creatively elaborated its particular understanding of people's struggle and sought to persuade others to join its cause.

My analysis begins, in the next chapter, with an analysis of the work of the magazine in constructing people's struggle as a publicly recognized and performable type of politics. I trace the trajectories of force that motivate activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* to intervene in campaigns like the one in Gandhamur and to represent these campaigns as instances within a broader social movement. Thus, I give an account of how the scalar perspective of "consciousness" presented in this chapter becomes so powerful for them.

Chapter 3: Typing People's Struggles

3.1 A Categorical Refusal

"No, I do not want anything more to do with your research. You came in here asking about people's struggles, but that term is all wrong. I do not agree at all with your analysis."

At first, I was sure that Ganesh had misunderstood me. Gripping the phone tight to my ear, I rushed to explain myself more clearly, fumbling to find the words that would set things right. I had not expected this kind of reaction at all. I had visited and interviewed Ganesh only a few days before, and it had all been quite cordial. Why was he so angry now?

"I am sorry if I said anything that offended you," I pleaded, "I only wanted to ask if I might come and look at some of the older magazines."

But Ganesh told me bluntly that he would not permit me to view any more copies of his radical intellectual magazine *Altext*, nor would he assist me with my research in any way.

"I know you are working with those people at *Kēraḷīyam*," he said, "I have serious disagreements with them."

When I hung up the phone a few minutes later, I was still not sure what had gone wrong. It all seemed to hinge on my use of the term "people's struggles" (*janakīya samaraṇṇa!*). My previous interview with Ganesh had been largely with the historical role of *Altext* and several other magazines in the emergence of people's struggles. Not only was Ganesh the founder and managing editor of *Altext*, but a decade earlier he had edited the magazine of the People's Cultural Platform, *Prēraṇa*. As I describe in Chapter 1, these magazines, which were hubs of

social activism in the 1980s and early 1990s, can be seen as predecessors to *Kēraḷīyam* in a local tradition of using small magazines as a platform and organizing tool for "people's politics."

Indeed, it was Sunny, Adarsh, and other *Kēraḷīyam* associates who had referred me to Ganesh as a forebearer and an invaluable resource for understanding the historical roles of magazines in people's struggles. And indeed, in our interview, although Ganesh had used the term "new social movements," I had believed that we were talking about people's struggles the whole time. Now I saw that I had been far too shortsighted.

My phone call with Ganesh unsettled my implicit assumption that people's struggle was a stable category describing things in the world. People's struggle is a common term in Kerala, heard regularly on the TV news. Up until that point, I had not realized that it was such a contested category—that is, I had known people to contest whether any particular protest was a people's, but I had not heard them challenge the category itself. But in the weeks after that difficult phone call, I began to see the category of people's struggle as a claim within a contentious field. When the editors at *Kēraḷīyam* put together articles about people's struggles, they were making a claim about how diverse campaigns and protests ought to be grouped together—a claim that Ganesh rejected. When I started looking, I found that not only Ganesh, but others—a mainstream Communist, a journalist, a Muslim youth organization—made their own claims about how these same campaigns and protests should be classified. For my research, this meant that the category of people's struggle could no longer be only a topic of study; it had to become a research question as well.

What makes diverse political actors and events all of the same type? How is it that a fishworkers' strike, a protest of a polluting gelatin factory, and a campaign to ban alcohol from certain Muslim villages all come to be instances of people's struggle? In Chapter 2, I introduced

the scalar perspective of the solidarity organizers associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, for whom the campaign in Gandhamur was only one localized site for the pursuit of a "broader" social change agenda. In this chapter, I take a closer look at the work involved in consolidating the category of people's struggle, the vantage point from which the Gandhamur campaign and other contemporary Kerala protests look this way. I describe three inter-linked processes of "typification" by which the editors of *Kēraḷīyam* and their subscribers contributed to producing people's struggle as both a description of existing campaigns and protests and a claim about how politics ought to be.

The typification of politics is not only crucial to the work of solidarity organizers, but also to social movement organizing more generally. The term social movement is often used to describe a pattern of events that are all, in some crucial sense, instances of the same type. For example, in early 20th century Kerala, several violent rural conflicts were claimed by Communist activists to be class uprisings and, thus, part of their movement (Menon, 1994). Likewise, the recognition of any movement as a movement depends upon the construction and stabilization of recognizable, replicable types of political action.

In both sociology and anthropology, typification is generally described as part of the interpretive work of social movement actors. In sociology, the dominant concept for theorizing such interpretive work is "framing," a process in which social movement organizations (SMOs) select and highlight certain elements of reality. Framing emphasizes the agency of SMOs in strategically constructing representations of reality that further their goals. In anthropology, the concepts of recognition and essentialization have been central (Nash, 2005). Activists in social movements must fit themselves to certain established categories in order to receive recognition from the state, the public, or others to whom they appeal. But the process of fitting movements to

categories is always essentializing; it always requires erasing some of the diversity and complexity of actual people and events. Thus, in contrast to accounts of strategic framing, anthropology has often been more concerned with the semiotic violence of typification and the limits of activists' agency in representing themselves (Stephen, 2005; Sylvain, 2005). Nonetheless, what these literatures share is an emphasis on typification as a matter of interpretation in which there are strategic choices, however limited, to be made.

My conversation with Ganesh prompted me to re-examine the category of people's struggles, but it also made me question accounts of social movement typification as a strategic interpretive choice. Indeed, what was most puzzling was not that people's struggle was a contentious category—my familiarity with dominant theories of meaning in linguistic anthropology should have led me to expect as much. What was most puzzling was that a category that aroused such adamant objections from Ganesh had, up to that point, seemed so utterly uncontested. Conducting participant observation among the activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, people's struggle had always seemed part of the background of strategy—a source of concepts, principles, and aims—not a strategic choice itself. And this was confirmed when I told Adarsh and others about Ganesh's objection to the term; they proclaimed themselves to be as surprised as I was and said they could not make any sense of it. Likewise, when I asked them about where the term had come from, or when it had originated, many found the question wrongheaded. One older activist replied, "What makes you think there was ever a time *without* people struggles?" and pointed out that many Malayali activists considered the rebellion of Spartacus a people's struggle.²⁰ It was not just that *Kēraḷīyam* activists claimed that people's

²⁰ Ironically, this activist, who had been involved in alternative left activism as far back as the *Janakīya Sāmskārika Vēdi*, was referring to a theatrical adaptation of the Spartacus story that

struggle was the accurate way of describing things; they seemed unaware of the need for any such claim. And yet, the counter-claims of Ganesh and others, together with the sheer diversity of campaigns of and protests that solidarity organizers called people's struggles, belied this obliviousness to construction and contestation, provoking me to continue inquiring about what work, if not strategic interpretation, was upholding the stability of people struggle as a sociopolitical type.

This tension between naturalness and contestation makes the work of *Kēraḷīyam* an apt site for examining the social forces that drive the typification of social movements. On the one hand, as Ganesh suggests, "those people at *Kēraḷīyam*" appeared to be engaged in establishing and sustaining their version of reality as dominant. On the other hand, they took the category of people's struggle as stable and pre-existent—a condition for their strategizing, rather than an aim. Together, these two perspectives present us with a chicken-or-egg paradox: is people's struggle an impetus for the work of *Kēraḷīyam* or a product of that work? To tackle his paradox adequately, we must depart from accounts of typification as strategic interpretation, which privilege the notion of types as products rather than motives of social movements. The typifying work of *Kēraḷīyam* and its associates, I argue, is better understood as an engagement with the enticements and prompts of value-laden real types than a strategic imposition of normative structure onto a formless and value-neutral world.

3.2 People's Struggle Type 1: Ink and Paper

The most obvious place to begin our inquiry about *Kēraḷīyam* is on the pages of the magazine itself. As noted in Chapter 1, the monthly periodical covers a wide range of topics—

Ganesh had penned during that period. Thus, his claim to the eternal and uncontested status of people's struggles was also, in effect, a bold usurpation of enemy territory.

including environmental conservation, political corruption, natural health remedies, bicycling, education, agriculture, and human rights. But it is best known for its coverage of people's struggles. The editors, Sunny and Adarsh, pride themselves on covering developments in ongoing struggles not only when they are already in the public eye, but, more importantly, when the mainstream media has turned its inconstant gaze elsewhere. Even issues primarily concerned with health or organic farming techniques will also include the latest news from one or two struggles. In short, reading *Kēraḷīyam*, one gets the impression that people's struggles are a pervasive feature of the political scene in Kerala. Not surprisingly, then, it is also in *Kēraḷīyam* that individual campaigns and protests appear most self-evidently as instances of a type.

Consider, for example, the "people's struggle map" (*janakīya samara bhūpaṭam*) from Chapter 2, Figure 2, which was published as *Kēraḷīyam's* rear cover in August 2012. As noted earlier, the use of dots and place names to designate each struggle strips diverse campaigns and protests of all of their particularity except their positions in space. The map contributes to the typification of people's struggles by suggesting an iconicity between the struggles and the dots. According to Charles Peirce, an icon is a sign that represents an object by means of a similarity; for example, "a geometrical figure drawn on paper may be an *icon* of a triangle or other geometrical form" (Peirce, 1992, p. 306). But how can a dot be similar to a social movement? In this case, the two are similar in the sense that they are spatially defined. Just as the dots are only differentiated by their spatial positioning so, the map suggests, people's struggles are the same thing occurring in multiple places. They are tokens of a type.

Part of the work of producing *Kēraḷīyam* magazine consists of generating iconicity between ink-and-paper representations of campaigns and protests. During the period of my research, much of this work fell to Adarsh, the assistant editor. Part of this was because Sunny,

the magazine's founder and managing editor, had taken a job as a clerk in another town in order to help support his ailing parents. But even if Sunny had been around more, Adarsh probably would have done most of the actual editorial work for the magazine. Sunny was a born networker, but Adarsh was a journalist by training and by heart, and his main commitments were to producing solid content and readable prose, in that order. He solicited the articles and illustrations; conducted, transcribed, and wrote up the interviews; laid out the pages; checked the proofs and delivered them to the printers; and brought the printed copies back to the office for mailing. Because I lived with Adarsh and his wife, Faiza, during most of my research, I came to know this process intimately.

Just as the dots on the map erase certain particularities while retaining others, so Adarsh constructed iconicity between struggles by means of selection and emphasis. This was not accomplished all at once; representations of struggles were filtered and re-formatted at multiple stages of the editorial process. Consider, for example, the process of producing a one-page update on the campaign to shut down the gelatin factory in Gandhamur village. About six months after the police violence described in Chapter 2, when the ensuing surge in media attention had died down and most solidarity organizers had ceased visiting Gandhamur, Adarsh decided it was time for an update on the campaign. Early on a Sunday morning, we set out to interview Vijayan, the leader of the Gandhamur Action Council.

The interview was held in Vijayan's front visiting room. We took an audio recording, but Adarsh also took notes in a palm-sized spiral notebook. The interview lasted over an hour, with Vijayan going into complex details of engineering, legal process, and local politics. There was tension surrounding the recent withdrawal of solidarity organizers, and Adarsh asked him some pointed questions. Previously, I had watched Vijayan evade such questions from both Adarsh

and myself, but this time he candidly addressed criticisms that had been made of the campaign and his own leadership. Adarsh made many notes during these more controversial moments, but this was only the first transcript he would make. A few days later, I would sit by him in the *Kēraḷīyam* office while he listened to the interview again, with another, larger notebook in hand, taking a second set of notes. The first notes were just a guideline, he told me, to aid him in making the second set, which covered about fifteen pages of a re-purposed diary. He called these his transcription. They would be the basis for the update.

With each listening, each re-writing, Adarsh filtered Vijayan's words, selecting those that pertained to the purpose of the update. Sitting beside Adarsh at the computer, watching him type up and arrange the final columns of text, I could only catch glimpses of this filtration. The cursor flicked across the screen, cutting bits from here, pasting them there, adding a line, taking a line away. Adarsh rarely seemed to need much time to reflect; he wrote as he listened, then typed and tweaked. He manipulated the words and images on the screen so quickly that it was hard for me to follow. And even when I could follow the flow of his decisions across the screen, I had little insight into the reasons for those decisions. Adarsh was not interested in talking about that part of the process. He worked quickly, quietly, and alone.

Even without tracking every stage of the filtration process, however, it is not hard to see how the final article retains some particularities while reducing others, shaping Vijayan's words to fit a standard mold. The final article fits on a single page, printed on the back cover of that month's issue. It is arranged in five bold-faced questions with answers below. Each of the questions focuses on recent developments: a court verdict allowing the company to repair its waste pipe, a recent meeting with the Minister of Industry, the discovery by struggle participants that factory waste is being sold to a company in a nearby village, and the campaign's stand with

regard to the upcoming elections. The answers provide relevant details and commentary on each of these events. The specific information is all particular to the Gandhamur campaign, of course, but the sorts of questions and answers presented, the characters (e.g. the struggle participants, the government officials, the company) described, and the style of language are all familiar. They are consistent with other updates on people's struggles, which make up a substantial portion of *Kēraḷīyam*'s content. Even the format of the title, "X Struggle Continues," is common for such updates.

This iconicity between the format of Vijayan's interview and other "struggle updates"²¹ is crucial to how *Kēraḷīyam* makes the Gandhamur campaign recognizable as a token of the "people's struggle" type. Just as the similarity of the dots on the map suggests similarity between struggles, so also with the similar formatting of updates. This is most evident in *Kēraḷīyam*'s "Kerala of Struggle" (*Samarakēraḷam*) issue, a compendium of updates on major people's struggle throughout Kerala.²² Like the article described above, the articles in "Kerala of Struggle" are generally composed by Adarsh based on interviews with leaders in individual struggles. Presented side-by-side, it is easy to pick out similarities in style, such as the frequent use of military metaphors, or even the repetition of specific phrases such as "on to the final battle" or "arriving at a crucial stage." Most updates have a standard narrative structure, beginning with an initial description of the injustice that is the basis of the struggle, a story of the formation of an action council, challenges to victory such as injustices by police and government

²¹ I coin this term here for convenience' sake. There is no single term used by Adarsh and Sunny to describe such content in *Kēraḷīyam*. However, this lack of a local term should not be taken to indicate the non-existence of a coherent type. The editors do group this content together in other ways, as can be noted by its appearance under a single heading in their digital archive, for example, and as should be evident from the analysis here.

²² Adarsh often spoke of a desire to publish additional compendia, but lamented that it was much more time-consuming than other issues of the magazine.

officials, and, finally, a call to support the struggle in its next phase.

The opponents and aims represented on the pages of "Kerala of Struggle" are extremely diverse: from campaigns to shut down landfills and quarries, to demands for farmable land from the government, to efforts to ban alcohol from certain villages. In all cases, the protagonists are "people" (*janannaḷ*), an iconicity that deserves further examination. *Janannaḷ* is the plural form of *janam*, which is also the root for *janakīya*, "of the people," in *janakīya samaram*, "people's struggle." Unlike *āḷ*, "person," the singular *janam* means the people as a collective or mass (in old Communist magazines, "the masses" is glossed as "*bahu*" *janam*, or "big" *janam*). Collective reference to *janam* is used when making an opposition between the people and something else, as in "popular opinion" (*janābhiprāyam*), "people's representative" (*janapratinidhi*), or "democracy" (*janādhipatyam*, literally, "rule of the people). As suggested by these examples, the people/non-people contrast is often employed in political discourse. The plural *janannaḷ* retains this sense of contrast. *Janannaḷ* are people (plural) acting as *the* people.

On the pages of *Kēraḷīyam*, "people" (*janannaḷ*) designates participants in a campaign or protest, usually members of a local Action Council, or sometimes those who are affected by the campaign's issue, such as the victims of pollution from the gelatin factory. The contrastive valence of the term sets up an opposition with other non-people actors. In the update on Gandhamur, these include the gelatin company, the police, political parties, the courts, the local government (*panchayat*), and other government agencies. All of these other actors have "people" (*āḷukaḷ*, plural of *āḷ*, "person"), but they do not have *janannaḷ*; they do not have people acting as the people. While this distinction would seem obvious to any Malayali (companies and courts cannot, in any context, be called *janannaḷ*), it also sets up a distinction between the struggle participants in Gandhamur, for example, and all of the other people in Gandhamur who might

take themselves to be part of *janam*, "the people."²³ In Gandhamur, for example, campaign participants were a relative minority of inhabitants; there were many who supported the company and even more who avoided the conflict altogether. When discussing their positions with respect to the gelatin factory controversy, these others also claimed the moniker of "the people," and those who supported the company described the Action Council as opponents of the people. Even campaign participants would sometimes refer to these other village residents as *jananna!* as well. But in the narratives of updates on struggles, these other possible claimants to the people were absent.

The iconicity of the people/non-people opposition in struggle updates is part of how *Kēraḷīyam* constructs and delimits the people's struggle type. While the term people's struggle is part of common parlance, heard often on TV news channels, it is also common to hear contention over which contemporary protests count as people's struggles. The Gandhamur campaign's opponents often claimed that it was not a real people's struggle. One Communist politician claimed that no such politically unaffiliated campaign could be called a people's struggle; real people's struggles were campaigns run by the Communist Party. Part of Adarsh's filtering work, however, consisted of tidying up this messiness and contention. In the "Kerala of Struggle" issue, there is no ambiguity about what counts as a "people's struggle." They are listed in the table of contents.

In many ways, Adarsh's filtering work fits well with accounts of "framing" in the sociology of social movements. For sociologists seeking to understand the causal factors that

²³ In this respect, the use of the term "locals" (*nāṭṭukār*) in *Kēraḷīyam* parallels the use of "people" (*jananna!*). In most other contexts, all people living in the area would be considered "locals," including any people who oppose or avoid participating in a particular campaign. But in struggle updates, this term is used to contrast those participating in the struggle from their opponents. For further discussion of localness in people's struggle politics, see Chapter 2.

contribute to the formation and success of movements, theories of framing have been the dominant way of accounting for human agency and the role of interpretation. Building on the work of Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974), sociologists turned to the notion of "frames" beginning in the late 1980s to describe the interpretive work of social movement actors, and the concept has since become standard fare in social movement studies. Within this literature, framing is conceptualized as a discursive process in which "slices of observed, experiences, and/or recorded 'reality' are assembled, collated, and packaged" (Benford and Snow 2000: 623). As Goffman points out, though some "reality" may be presupposed by this concept, the focus here is on interpretation as a social activity—the assembling, collating, and packaging (Goffman, 1974, p. 156). Thus, many studies of framing focus on how activists either produce media or attempt to influence the production of media. When Adarsh edits Vijayan's interview, selecting and re-arranging words, images, or other sign, this could all be described as framing. Indeed, insofar as Vijayan's narrative already frames recent events in the campaign for Adarsh, the latter's typifying work might be described as re-framing.

In addition to describing well the filtering work necessary to producing "struggle updates," the concept of framing also gives helpful emphasis to the contentious nature of this interpretive work. According to one influential definition, framing, "is contentious in the sense that it involves the generation of interpretive frames that not only differ from existing ones but that may also challenge them" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). In other words, a frame is not only an interpretation, but also a claim about how reality *should* be interpreted; frame-making is claim-making.

The framing analytic draws attention to how Adarsh's typifying work positions *Kēraḷīyam* within a contentious field populated by other actors, such as Ganesh and *Altext*,

with their own stakes in the typification of people's struggles. In a later interview with Ganesh, who did eventually agree to continue the conversation, he explained that current issues of *Altext* used the term "new social movements" to refer to what *Kēraḷīyam* called people's struggles. He considered the latter term to be part of a Maoist idiom—one he himself had employed during his days as editor of *Prēraṇa*—whereas "new social movements" was consistent with his current, post-Marxist analysis. Another alternative "framing" could be found on the pages of *Mādhyamam*, which released its own compendium of "Struggles for Life" (*jīvitasamarāṇṇa!*) shortly after the publication of "Kerala of Struggle," listing most of the same campaigns. Through the activism of its youth wing, *Justice Now*, the Muslim group that publishes *Mādhyamam* has made support for these campaigns and protests central to its efforts to gain traction in Kerala politics.

However, as noted earlier, the notion of framing as claim-making also points to the limits of the concept's applicability to the work of *Keralayeeam*. Whereas Ganesh's decision to use the term "new social movements" in *Altext* might be seen as the kind of strategic claim described in the literature on social movement framing, I could find no parallel among Ganesh's chosen opponents. When I recounted Ganesh's various terminological arguments to Adarsh, he replied that he did not see how the latter term was incompatible with "people's struggle." Indeed, though people's struggle was the more common term in *Kēraḷīyam*, "new social movements" occasionally appeared in its place. In conversation, *Kēraḷīyam* associates used the two terms interchangeably, and I could find no one who thought that "people's struggle" was the more Marxist of the two. More generally, as noted earlier, people were baffled by the notion that there was any need for contention about the matter. Indeed, although Adarsh often called himself a media activist, and his editorial work clearly served to construct people's struggle as a type, it is

not clear that he understood the category of people's struggle to need constructing, nor that contention over this category was part of what his activism was about.

Adarsh talked about the importance of coverage of people's struggles in a couple of ways. The first, which was also common to hear among subscribers, was as "documentation" (English). Adarsh said that *Kēraḷīyam* needed to cover people's struggles because there was so much that the corporate newspapers and TV channels, which were always chasing the next thrill, would inevitably miss. Thus, his update on the Gandhamur struggle had been motivated, in part, by a desire to document what would otherwise go unrecorded. Likewise, while several of the *Kēraḷīyam* subscribers most involved in people's struggles often did not read the magazines they received (a matter I will come back to in a moment), they did tend to keep them. Newspaper subscriptions were regularly trashed, but old issues of *Kēraḷīyam* would pile up on a shelf or in a corner—a practice that readers attributed to the magazine's value as documentation.

As a motive for *Kēraḷīyam's* typifying work, documentation runs against the usual logic of social movement framing in two ways. First, social movement framing is primarily about persuading others to join or support the movement. Here, however, all of Adarsh's filtered and formatted struggle updates go, at best, onto the shelves of the magazine's seven hundred subscribers. But although Sunny and Adarsh actively worked to find new subscribers within activist circles, they made no effort to distribute the magazine via Kerala's many newsstands. They claimed not to be interested in reaching non-activists. Second, documentation presupposes that people's struggles are already out there. Framing theory also requires something to be out there, but the meaning and value of what is out there are imposed by the social movement actor and motivated by that actor's interests. Documentation is not an imposition of meaning and value, but a salvage effort, motivated by the concern that something out there might not make it

into print. In documentation, people's struggle appears to be the impetus as much as the product.

While documentation was the most common way that Adarsh described the importance of people's struggle updates, he suggested another motive with regard to the particular update on the Gandhamur struggle analyzed here. In the days leading up to Adarsh's visit to Vijayan's house, we spoke a lot about why he wanted to conduct an interview just then. As usual, Adarsh had no illusions that *Kēraḷīyam* could do anything to recover the campaign's fading fame. What worried him, he said, was what might happen in Gandhamur when no one was paying attention. He was concerned that the readers and friends of *Kēraḷīyam* were not going to Gandhamur anymore, not participating in rallies or meetings; he was worried about what direction the campaign might take in their absence. Adarsh believed that, by publishing a struggle update, he might help to sustain the connection between Gandhamur and the solidarity organizers and, thus, keep the campaign from veering off course.

What kind of connection could this short article, destined for the shelves of solidarity organizers no longer very interested in Gandhamur, possibly sustain? To understand Adarsh's reasoning, it will be necessary to shift scenes from the lone computer in the back of the *Kēraḷīyam* office, where people's struggle is typified in ink and paper, to the role of the magazine as an institutional hub for a network of solidarity organizers. And with this shift, we will also come a step closer to resolving the chicken-or-egg paradox, exemplified by the work of documentation, in which people's struggle is simultaneously before and after *Kēraḷīyam's* typifying work.

3.3 People's Struggle Type 2: Iconicities of Ethical Stance

Adarsh and Sunny were not unconcerned about the reach of *Kēraḷīyam*. In the past, the

magazine had been delivered to as many as 1200 subscribers, but that number had dwindled in recent years. Adarsh attributed this to the absence of Sunny, who had been forced to resume employment as a government clerk in order to fund the magazine and support his ailing parents. Adarsh loved the work of gathering material for the magazine and editing it, and he knew he was good at it, but he did not believe he had Sunny's penchant for networking. During my research, Adarsh was actively searching for a marketing assistant who could help to fill the gap left by Sunny's absence, but he was unable to find anyone willing to take the job.

While Sunny's diminished involvement with *Kēraḷīyam* may have led to fewer subscriptions, his role as networker should not be primarily understood in terms of its effect upon the magazine's reach. As noted earlier, at least some *Kēraḷīyam* subscribers did not regularly read the magazines they received. This was most true of those who were most active in people's struggles, many of whom said that they already knew what was going on, so struggle updates were redundant. Adarsh and Sunny were both painfully aware that the magazine often went unread, and they were under no illusion that more subscribers necessarily meant more reading. They described two motives for seeking subscribers. The first was purely economic; more subscriptions meant more revenue. The second motive was more complex; it was in some sense about reaching more people, but it was not necessarily about getting the magazine's pages before more eyes. It was about building a community of people's struggle activists. To appreciate the latter motive, it will help to look more closely at Sunny's networking activity.

Let's start at a folding table just outside the doors of a large lecture hall. Inside, activists are giving speeches to close a fifty-day "Dialogue Journey" (*samvādayātra*), a walking tour down through the foothills of the Western Ghats mountains aimed at garnering support for stronger policy to protect mountain rainforests. The journey organizers carried Western Ghats-

focused issues of *Kēraḷīyam* with them, though not many were sold. Some of those that remain are displayed on the table now, side-by-side with other old issues that Sunny and Adarsh have brought to sell. A young woman who joined the Dialogue Journey along the way, Preethi, is scanning the titles.

Sunny has a chair near the end of the table, but he is rarely in it. The speeches have been going a few hours now, and it is getting late. People have begun to drift out of the meeting hall, some just for a cigarette or a chat, but others to their motorbikes and cars, or down the road in search of a bus. Sunny mingles in the outflow from the hall like a trapeze artist; grasping the hand of one acquaintance, swinging away to the shoulder of the next, and introducing the two of them to each other as he twirls away to nab a third. He is in especially good form tonight, the best I have seen in over a year. Earlier this evening, he told me that he is beginning to feel like his old self again; inviting people to a recent *Kēraḷīyam* book release has gotten him active on SMS and phone. He says it is hard because he knows this means he has less time and energy to care for his ailing mother, but he is much happier.

Hot on the scent of a ripe ethnographic happening, I catch up with Preethi and, executing a small twirl of my own, guide her over to Sunny. He shoots a sly grin at my notebook as he introduces himself, happy to play along. He asks whether he has not seen her somewhere before and, while she fumbles for a polite response (he hasn't), he draws the latest issue of *Kēraḷīyam* out of his bag. Has she heard of it? She believes she has heard of it before somewhere, she says, but she is sure she has never read it. He presses the magazine into her hands as he launches into a little eulogy of all its virtues and importances. It is all hyperbolic, all said with a laugh, but it is earnest nonetheless.

Preethi readily agrees to buy the magazine, but Sunny is after more. He wants a

subscription or, better yet, an article; she could write a piece on her experiences on the Dialogue Journey, he says. They could publish it in the next issue.

"This is an activist magazine, not a mainstream publication," he explains, "We are trying to build a *kūṭṭāyama* (collective) of activists."

But the more he presses, the more her she shrinks down behind the magazine, unresponsive, but he persists.

"Have you met Father Sebastian?" he asks, reaching out and snagging the priest's hand as he goes by.

And she has, of course, since Father Sebastian is one of the leaders of the Dialogue Journey.

"What! You have met Father Sebastian and yet you don't know *Kēraḷīyam*? Sebastian is our top salesman!"

And though Fr. Sebastian hurries on without a word, his warm smile suggests that this is not entirely an exaggeration.

Like this, as he continues his pitch, Sunny "introduces" Preethi to one person after another: Ranjith, Manan, Amna and Amra ("What! You already know Amna and Amra? They are our brand ambassadors!"). All are people Preethi has already met on the Dialogue Journey. By the time he pulls aside Saleem, whom she knows from her own hometown, she is convinced. She ducks away to find her purse, and Sunny turns and catches hold of a passerby, a heavy-set man with a long-nosed camera and several oddly shaped bags hanging from his shoulders. Sunny hands him a copy of the magazine, reminds him he is expecting photos for the next issue, and takes his phone number. By the time Preethi returns, he has sent the man a copy of an SMS he keeps ready in his drafts folder for just such occasions—an introduction to *Kēraḷīyam*.

We might see this vignette as a glimpse into the art of an expert salesman—and to some extent, Sunny's interest in recruiting both Preethi and the cameraman is straightforwardly financial. But Sunny wants to recruit Preethi to be more than just a dues payer; he wants her to contribute in other ways as well. In making this part of his pitch, he tells Preethi that "we are trying to build a collective of activists." In light of this comment, Sunny's attempts to draw ties between the magazine and Preethi's existing acquaintances are more than just another tactic to get her to reach for her purse. He is sketching out a web of relationships—a web in which she already has begun to have a place. One might say that he is trying to build *Kēraḷīyam's* "collective" (*kūṭṭāyama*) right there before her eyes, and he wants to build her right into it.

The term *kūṭṭāyama*, which I've glossed above as "collective," can be found on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam* as well. Announcements of upcoming events and calls for article submissions or subscriptions are usually addressed to the "*Kēraḷīyam kūṭṭāyama*." Occasionally, those most closely associated with the magazine talked about themselves in the same way. According to a Malayalam professor who is active in the gelatin factory campaign and several other struggles, the term is a relatively new in activist circles. But *kūṭṭāyama* appears to have deeper roots in Christian discourse, where it is commonly translated to English as "fellowship." Recently, it has become common in the titles of neighborhood organizations and volunteer groups as well, including some contemporary caste-based organizations.

Within alternative leftist activist circles, *kūṭṭāyama* connotes social relations distinct different from those of *samudāyam* ("community"), which is generally used to refer to caste and religious groups, and *kuṭumbam* ("family"). Among activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, the hereditary and hierarchical connotations of the latter terms are seen as negative. *Kūṭṭāyama*, on the other hand, suggests a voluntary gathering and has no necessary hierarchical structure—whether

internally or in relation to other groups. Unlike its grammatical sister noun *kūṭṭam* ("group"), with which it shares the root verb *kūṭṭuka* ("to gather (transitive)"), *kūṭṭāyama* can be used to describe both a quality of togetherness and an actual collective of people. This makes the term fitting for the aspirational usage of Sunny and other *Kēraḷīyam* activists. They were a *kūṭṭāyama* ("collective"), to some extent, but they still needed to increase their *kūṭṭāyama* ("togetherness").

Sunny and other activists commonly employed *kūṭṭāyama* in a third way as well: as a descriptor of certain overnight outings that were also sometimes referred to with the English term "camp." These gatherings have their roots in genealogies of environmental activism, which has used them to raise awareness and build community among young people since the early 1970s. During the period of my research, many of *Kēraḷīyam*'s closest associates organized moonlight camps (*nilāv kūṭṭāyama*), rain camps (*maḷa kūṭṭāyama*), song camps (*pāṭṭ kūṭṭāyama*), and even gossip camps (*paradūṣaṇa kūṭṭāyama*)²⁴, in which people would tell each other openly what they usually only said behind each other's backs. Although Sunny did not organize all of these camps himself, the initiative of other organizers was usually traceable in part to his persistent urging. During my final stint of dissertation fieldwork, there were few camps because Sunny was rarely around and always tired. But shortly after the end of the Dialogue Journey, temporarily energized by his return to SMSing and magazine peddling, he organized a rain camp, and Preethi was one of the attendees.

The camp was held at the seaside—a likely location when one is hoping for rain. About a dozen of us gathered at *Kēraḷīyam*, where we were picked up in a big, old van used for many

²⁴ One of the major limitations of this dissertation is surely that I never had the opportunity to observe one of these "gossip camps." It seemed that whenever I returned to Kerala, one had only just been held. And, though I asked about them often, they were never held again until I had departed.

such events—the "struggle van" (*samaravaṇṭi*). It was dark by the time we reached the beach. A fat moon was high overhead, drawing the waves up into teetering white peaks and dashing them against the seawall. The waves were so loud we had to shout. Sunny shouted to those near him, and they shouted to those near them, and eventually we had all been gathered into the living room of a small, unfurnished beachhouse, a loan from a poet friend of Sunny's. We spread out on the tile floor facing one another, the ring of our bodies expanding as more come in, until every back was against a wall. We just fit. Then, Sunny called for a song. As usual, for a minute or two everyone was trying to convince everyone else to start. But at last Fr. Sebastian, having already refused a few times, agreed to raise his voice above the rest:

"*Nām onn allēēē?* (clap clap clap) *Nammaḷ onn allēēē?* (clap clap clap)"

(*Are we not one? Are we not one?*)

It is a common song among the *Kēraḷīyam* crowd—the song I had heard far more than any other during the past three years. It is the same song we sang on the Dialogue Journey every time we marched into a major junction or a bus stop. It is the same song Fr. Sebastian sang at the start of my first such camp—a full moon camp—three years before.

"*Nammukkūḍēyōmmm?* (clap clap clap) *Ī maṇṇilūḍēyōmmm?* (clap clap clap)"

Nammaḷ allēēē? (clap clap clap) *Nammaḷ allēēē?* (clap clap clap)"

(*Through ourselves? Through this soil? Are we not? Are we not?*)

I am not entirely sure why *Kēraḷīyam* activists sang this song so much—Adarsh's wife Faiza once suggested to me that it was simply because the words are easy to remember. But as an opening to a camp, it was fitting. The repetition of a simple rhetorical question —"Are we not one?"—drowned out the breaking waves. With all voices singing in unison, all hands clapping in rhythm, we declared and enacted what *kūṭṭāyama*, both as camp and as activist collective, is all

about.

When the song was done, Sunny made the song's message even more explicit, describing in brief the purpose of the rain camp and the tradition to which it belongs. He said that camps are ways of bringing "people who are different" (*vyatyastamāya āḷukaḷ*) together for shared experience and increased awareness. Here, he said, such people can "experience relief and make bonds." He described those gathered in the beachhouse as people who "can envision things differently, who can stand apart and see differently...who intervene differently." In other words, it was their difference from others that made all of those in the circle similar.

As we went around the room, each introducing him or herself, I heard this point echoed again and again—similarity with each other and difference from the world beyond. Peter earns his income as a medical technician, but really he is a farmer at heart, and he is working on developing new organic agricultural techniques that generate enough profit to support his family. Fr. Sebastian is a priest, but he is not like the priests you've met; he has no parish and spends all his time on people's struggles. Preethi has now left her job as a teacher in a government school and is collaborating with Saleem on a project to start an environmentalist commune. Each person described him or herself as different from the mainstream, just as Sunny had suggested, but they were different in predictable ways. All of these differences, which made these people similar to one another, could be found on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam*. And here was people's struggle again, among these other differences—not any campaign or protest, but the activity of people's struggle generally, used to indicate how one is different from some and similar to others. People's struggle invoked as a means, that is, of introducing oneself as an instance of a specific type of person.

In the rain camp, then, we can see how *Kēraḷīyam* contributes to a second sort of

typification. Typification in the camp, like the representation of people's struggle as a type in ink and paper, produces iconicity, only here we are primarily concerned with iconicity between people. Or, more accurately, iconicity between where people stand in relation to the mainstream.

In their introductions, when activists highlight their participation in activities like organic agriculture, people's struggle activism, or establishing environmental communes, these are not only attributes they hold in common. They are also, in Sunny's terms, ways that the rain camp participants "stand apart and see differently" and "envision things differently." The contrast between those gathered in the beachhouse and the rest of the world is not only a factual contrast, but an evaluative contrast. In other words, what marks those at the camp as instances of a type are iconicities, or alignments, of ethical stance.

Sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have developed the spatial metaphor of stance to describe evaluation in linguistic practice (Englebretson, 2007; Jaffe, 2009). To take a stance is, essentially, to evaluate some object.²⁵ A key insight in this literature is that positioning oneself with respect to an object of evaluation also entails alignments or disalignments with others who evaluate the same object (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Du Bois (2007), for instance, proposes that we understand evaluative stance in terms of a "stance triangle" (see Figure 5). The stance triangle helps to visualize how, when multiple subjects evaluate the same object, they also position themselves in relation to one another.²⁶ For example, in the following transcript, speaker

²⁵ This understanding of stance is most obvious with respect to the practices of assessment described here, though less so with respect to "epistemic stance," which positions subjects as knowing/not knowing in relation to an object. Du Bois (2007) argues for a definition of stance as broadly evaluative, however, which would include epistemic stance. This definition is also taken up by later authors (Jaffe, 2009).

²⁶ DuBois points out that alignment/disalignment is gradient along a continuum, not a binary distinction (2007, p. 162). As I show in Chapter 6, it is also clear that there is no single gradient for evaluative alignment/disalignment, but that different kinds of evaluation may entail different kinds of alignment or disalignment, even within a single evaluative act.

C makes an assessment of public schools, and D responds with an assessment of the same object:

C: ... 'hh a:n' uh by god I can' even send my kid tuh public school
b'cuz they're so goddamn lousy.

D: We : : ll, that's a generality.

C: 'hhh

D: We've got sm pretty (good schools.)

C: //Well, yeah, but where in the hell em I gonna live.

(Pomerantz, 1984, p. 72)

In this example, D and C are both evaluating the same object, but they take different positions. The difference between C's assessment of public schools as "so goddamn lousy" and D's assessment of the same schools as "pretty good" marks a disalignment between their positions with respect to public schools. Thus, the evaluative statements of D and C are not only isolated descriptions of individual preferences, but also acts of positioning relative to one another.

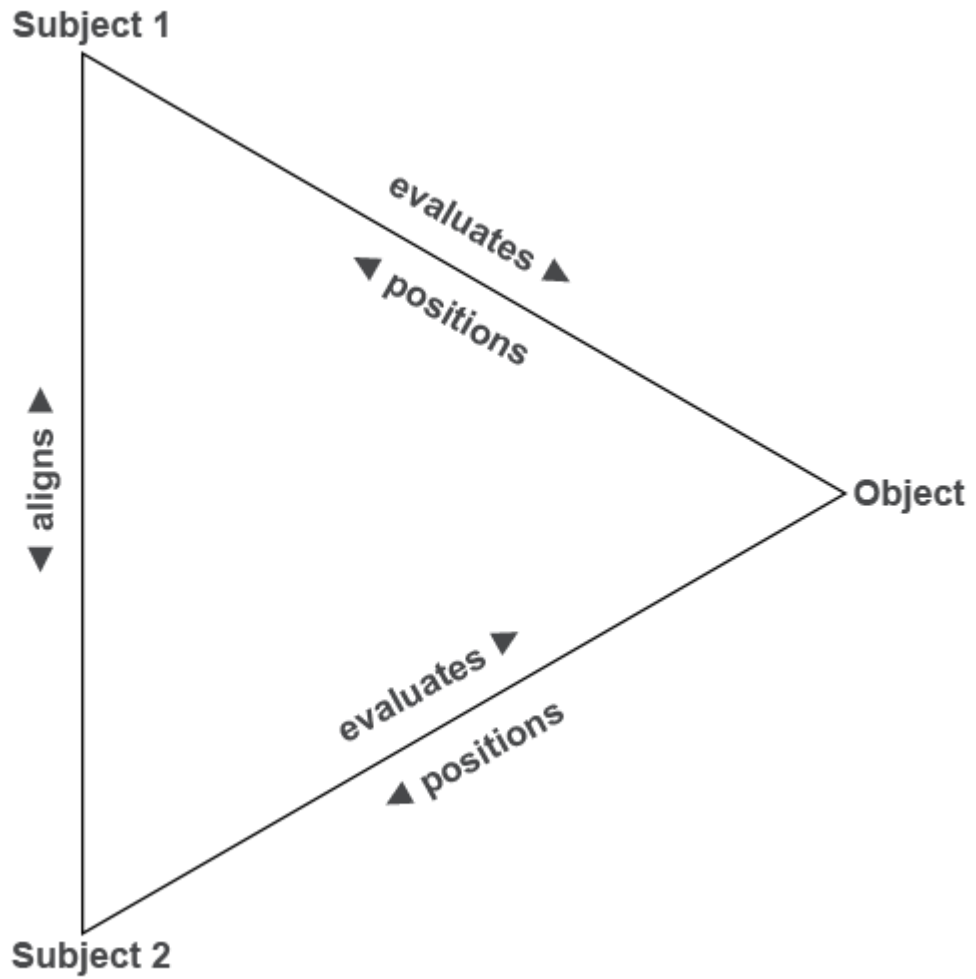


Figure 5: DuBois' Stance Triangle (2007, p. 163)

In the rain camp, conversations are littered with linguistic stance alignments, but they are rarely as explicit as the example of disalignment between C and D. For example, after Paul described his own love of farming, others also introduced themselves as would-be farmers to varying degrees, marking their alignment with this endorsement of agriculture. More generally, in each introduction participants mark themselves as *different* from mainstream society, and different in certain stereotypical ways—love of nature, anti-patriarchy, skepticism of organized religion and political parties, commitment to people's struggles. They introduce iconicities into their stances with one another, typifying a certain mode of being an activist.

Much of the literature on stance-taking has focused on evaluation in language. To appreciate iconicities of stance in the rain camp, however, it is necessary to look beyond linguistic utterances to the embodied practices that participants share. With two monsoon seasons, Kerala is a fairly rainy place, but most Malayalis do not seek the rain. For most, a chance of rain is a reason to carry an umbrella if not a reason to stay in doors. But the camp participants' love of nature is such that, for them, a chance of rain is a reason to sit out all night. In doing so, they mark their disalignment with most Malayalis and their alignment with one another.

If the people's struggle type, on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam*, reads as a claim about the way things are, the typification of ethical stances at the rain camp can be understood as a claim about the way things are not, but ought to be. A little while after the introductions were over, I lay on the beach watching the last wisps of cloud dissipate in the starlight. The rain had not arrived, and the waves had calmed. Amna came and lay down next to me, only a few inches away, but I did not notice her just then. I did not notice her until the others came, telling us that they were headed further down the beach and inviting us to join. It is only then that I thought how strange it

was to lie next to a woman on a beach in India. At night. As strange as sitting out in the rain with no umbrella. But Amna seemed to think nothing of it, and before long we were all lying beside each other on a huge tarp—a tarp that could have been used to cover our heads—singing songs and waiting for the rain. Together, we were making present what was not present in the world around us, marking the changes that remained to be made and modeling the work required to bring about those changes.²⁷

I have described the contrasts camp participants marked in their "different" introductions, their disregard for traditional gender roles, and their scorn for umbrellas as all part of the same politics, suggesting not only iconicity with respect to any single us/them contrast, but also some iconicity between these diverse contrasts that binds them together. But if it was not for my familiarity with *Kēraḷīyam*, I doubt I would have seen how the diverse vectors of difference marked in the rain camp had anything in common. I would have seen iconicity between multiple invocations of farming in the introductions, but I probably would not have seen how farming, people's struggle, and environmentalist communes were similar, nor how all of these were linked to lying next to Amna on the beach. In *Kēraḷīyam*, however, articles on alternative agricultural methods and gender norms are folded in with struggle updates, and occasionally one finds an essay arguing for an integration of these diverse topics of concern into a single politics. Thus, the work of the magazine was there, even though the magazine itself was nowhere to be seen. In the rain camp, activists enacted what was represented more explicitly on the pages of the magazine—iconicity between forms in ink and paper became iconicity between forms of ethical life.

²⁷ This process is well-described by Boggs' notion of "prefigurative politics," in which activists attempt to bring about social change by producing in their relations with one another the forms of sociality that they would like to bring about in society at large.

Within the rain camp, people's struggle became a central activity in an activist life. Participants in the camp talked about the struggles they had recently visited and those they would be visiting soon, sharing news and gossip about struggles and debating what should be done. At times, camps were held on the sites of struggles, and the participants in local action councils were invited to join. Just as *Kēraḷīyam* magazine integrated struggle updates with articles on organic agriculture, nature cure, and alternative schooling, and gender relations, so activists in the rain camp integrated talk about struggles into the work of aligning with one another in their differences from the rest of Malayali society.

Like the representation of people's struggles on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam* (typification-1), the performance of iconicities of ethical stance in the rain camp contributed to the typification of people's struggle as a key activity in an activist life (typification-2). Like typification-1, typification of people's struggle in the rain camp also presupposes the prior existence of iconicities between campaigns and protests. In making people's struggle central to their alignment with one another, activists connected their solidarity with these campaigns and protests with desires and obligations regarding gender, money, food, forests, and caste—drawing the people's struggle type into a dense web of aligned moral stances. Alignments of stance not only engendered community among camp participants, but also made the idea of people's struggle larger and more vital here than anywhere else.

It is in large part through camps that activists elaborate the scalar perspectives on social change described in Chapter 2's analysis of solidarity organizers' talk about "consciousness" and "cause" in the Gandhamur campaign. As noted in the introduction, many activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* argued that the "struggle" (*samaram*) in people's struggle did not simply refer to

campaigns and protests; struggle should be a total way of life.²⁸ For example, one man argued that the Gandhamur campaign participants were not really committed to *samaram* because they continued to build with concrete (made from granite quarried from the ecologically sensitive Western Ghats mountains) even as they protested pollution in their own river. In camps, activists perform this way of life together, prefiguring in their relations with one another their vision for what people's struggle, as an activity central to an activist life, ought to be. In other words, in the rain camp, the narratives of self-other opposition found in *Kēralīyam's* struggle updates are embedded within a common effort for self-transformation.

In a key intervention in the sociology of social movements, Poletta (1997) argued that the conceptualization of framing as strategic action, in which interpretive constructs are means to preselected ends, does not adequately account for how such constructs may transform activists' self-understanding and chosen aims. Subsequent analyses of the role of "culture" in social movements have sought to correct for this shortcoming (see Poletta (2008) for a review). In the previous section, we saw how Adarsh's self-understanding, particularly with the notion of documentation, conflicted with the analysis of typification as strategic persuasion in any straightforward sense. The centrality of self-transformation in rain camps further undermines such an account; here, people's struggle is not a construct manipulated for the sake of pre-determined interests or pre-conceived aims. Rather, the people's struggle type has become a guidepost for re-orienting aims and reforming lives.

The anthropology of social movements has long made processes of self-transformation central to accounts of activists' efforts for recognition. In seeking to make claims on state

²⁸ As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, much of this way of life focused on avoiding the consumption of products perceived as environmentally or socially unfriendly.

agencies or appeals to public opinion, activists must present themselves as recognizable instances of certain morally sanctioned types—the aggrieved mother, the human trafficking victim, the rights-bearing citizen. As Dave (2012) describes in her account of lesbian activists New Delhi, the typifying work necessary to gain recognition from others can restrict the life possibilities of activists—the more successful they are in gaining recognition, the more they may find themselves conforming to fit essentialized identities. Thus, seeking recognition may overflow the outwardly directed presentation of self to others and become self-transformation in a more fundamental sense.

As in Dave's account, stance alignment in the rain camp mixes representation of self and reform of self. However, the logic of recognition here is not directed at the state or the public. Seated in a circle on the floor of the beachhouse, introducing themselves to one another, each participant seeks recognition in the eyes of others. However, they seek to be recognized not as instances of a type sanctioned by non-activists, but as different from those others. In seeking recognition from one another as different in certain mutually recognizable ways, they conform to an essentialized activist identity. But they also produce the identity to which they conform.

If self-transformation in the rain camp unsettles the account of strategic action at the heart of the framing concept, then, it also suggests a new motive that may drive the typification of people's struggles: the desire for recognition. In the rain camp, participants find belonging in not belonging. Sitting out on the beach, they align with one another by performing their disalignment with the values of those imagined to be inside their homes or under their umbrellas. Multiple alignments of stance bind them together as a moral community, a *kūṭṭāyama*. This, after all, is what Sunny sometimes describes as the real aim of *Kēraḷīyam*.

And yet, if Sunny, Preethi and others do come to the rain camp in search of recognition

and belonging, this is still not enough to explain what drives the typification of an alternative form of life nor the position of people's struggle (Type 2) within this form of life. If one only wishes to belong, why choose to find belonging in not belonging? As I describe in Chapter 6, many *Kēraḷīyam* activists find themselves out of place because of their alternative values and practices, out of alignment with their family members, their neighbors, and most of the people they encounter in everyday life. Camps are an exception; brief nights of intense alignment that contrast with the experience of disalignment that pervades an alternative life. Thus, even if the desire for belonging drives activists to produce iconicities of stance with one another, we must ask what prompts them to seek belonging here and in this way. If they produce the identity to which they conform, then why do they produce an identity so out of sync with those around them?

It is worth noting here that, just as the logic of "documentation" pre-supposes the existence of campaigns and protests, so activists described *kūṭṭāyama* as pre-supposing the need for solidarity activism. While Sunny and some others did at times claim that *kūṭṭāyama* was their central aim, they also often justified camps with regard to other ends. Indeed, they were often in a position of needing to justify camps because there were other prominent activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* who saw them as a waste of time. The latter argued that camps were just discussion for discussion's sake, distracting from the urgent task of winning people's struggles. Thus, far from justifying the typification of people's struggles in terms of their own desire for belonging, *Kēraḷīyam* activists often described the need for *kūṭṭāyama* in terms of its contribution to the politics of people's struggle. Paradoxically, then, while desire for belonging may be one motivation for the typification of people's struggle as an activity central to a form of life, many activists justified the pursuit of belonging by the need for the intervention in people's struggles.

To fully consider the latter vector of motivation, however, it will be necessary to shift to a third, and final, scene for the typification of people's struggles: the campaigns and protests themselves.

3.4 People's Struggle Type 3: Modes and Tactics of Political Action

The Dialogue Journey (*samvādayātra*) through the Western Ghats mountains was in many ways an extended "camp" (*kūṭṭāyama*). Like another environmentalist trek through the mountains twenty-five years before, the most explicit aim of the fifty-day foot journey was to raise awareness among mountain residents about the need for stricter environmental regulations in the region. This was to be done through an egalitarian model of conversation, or "dialogue" (*samvādam*),²⁹ with activists listening to locals, affirming their experiences, and, if necessary, posing questions that could help them to see things differently. But fifty days of conversations with locals were also fifty days of conversations with one another, fifty afternoons waiting for the day to cool enough to continue down the road, and fifty nights of men and women lying side-by-side, sometimes under moonlight. As I describe in Chapter 5, many of those participating in the journey—including Ali, the journey "captain"—considered activists' interactions with one another to be far more important than their conversations with locals. For Ali, the Dialogue Journey, like a camp, was about making better activists. And, although the changes in environmental policy sought by activists were not directly associated with any people's struggle,³⁰ people's struggles were often a topic of conversation.

²⁹ For further discussion of the notion of *samvādam*, and the purposes and techniques of the Dialogue Journey, see Chapter 5.

³⁰ Indeed, in the regions we visited, several local campaigns had been organized in protest of the policy changes that *Kēraḷīyam* activists favored. However, while these campaigns might have been interpreted as oppositions between "the people" and "the state," and were interpreted in this way by many locals, the Dialogue Journey participants did not call them people's struggles, nor were they represented as such on the pages of the magazine. Activists described them, instead, as organized or incited by the Catholic Church and the Communist Party--two groups with large

But the Dialogue Journey was also about people's struggle in another way. All along their route, the organizers of the journey met with the local leaders of anti-quarry campaigns. On the final day, just a few hours before I introduced Sunny to Preethi outside the lecture hall, several journey participants facilitated a meeting of these local leaders to plan the formation of a state-wide coalition of quarry struggles. The journey organizers had not publicized this aspect of the campaign, but it had been part of the purpose of the Dialogue Journey from the beginning. Some organizers told me that, in their view, the quarry coalition was always the primary purpose, and many *Kēraḷīyam* activists later talked about its formation as the major outcome of the Dialogue Journey.

The journey participants' interactions with quarry leaders, like their "dialogues" with mountain residents about environmental policy, were conducted with a great deal of concern about authority. They sought to organize struggles into a larger movement, but they did not want to lead that movement (Staples, 2000). In the planning meeting on the final day of the journey, this became a topic of contention. Many of the quarry struggle leaders wanted Dhanya, the activist who facilitated the meeting, to take the role of chair of the coalition as well. They pointed out that they did not have time to take this role because of their commitments to their own campaigns. Dhanya, moreover, had already taken an organizing role by gathering them there and leading the meeting, and she already knew all of them, whereas they had only just met each other. But Dhanya flatly refused. She and other journey participants, she said, would assist the coalition with media contacts, legal support, and advice, but it was not their place to lead it. For a campaign to be a people's struggle, the people had to lead.

constituencies in the region. While these constituencies are, obviously, made of people, insofar as they are acting under the control of hierarchical religious or political organizations, they are not "the people."

This emphasis on supporting and facilitating, rather than leading, distinguishes *Kēraḷīyam* activists' work in people's struggles from the activism of earlier environmental movements in Kerala. Activists marked this shift with the term "dialogue" journey, meant to contrast with a similar environmentalist walking tour through the Western Ghats, called the "conservation journey" (*samrakṣayātra*). Participants in the Dialogue Journey critically recounted how activists in the earlier journey had sought their own agenda, whereas the vision of the latter journey was to, somehow, support local people in conserving mountain ecology themselves.³¹ Similarly, in their work with the quarry coalition and other people's struggle activism, *Kēraḷīyam* activists often claimed that the ultimate agendas of people's struggles must be set by locals, who should also take the lead in carrying out those agendas. These activists had their own agendas—agendas that in many ways were consistent with those of earlier environmentalists—but they made people's struggle central to these agendas. And people's struggle was, by definition, by and for the people.

There is, to some extent, a paradox here: activists intervened in campaigns and protests and sought to influence them, but they also insisted that they remain "of the people." Thus, in organizing the coalition of quarry struggles, Dhanya did take a leadership role, in one moment, and refused on principle to take a leadership role in the next moment. Of course, assembling the coalition and chairing the coalition are two different kinds of leadership, and the interventions of solidarity organizers in people's struggles often hinged on such distinctions. For example, in Chapter 2, I described how solidarity organizers worked to persuade leaders in Gandhamur to

³¹ This contrast parallels a similar normative distinction between organizers and leaders in late 20th century American community organizing (Staples, 2000). For further discussion of this distinction and its relation to normative models of insider and outsider roles in organizing, see Chapter 2.

hold more regular meetings. But solidarity organizers did not call the meetings themselves. Likewise, they called a meeting of women privately, with a few carefully chosen women, to make a push for more female leadership in the campaign. But they were not the public face of this effort. Just as effecting change through "dialogue" was often about asking the right questions, so influencing the course of people's struggles was about making suggestions, offering support, or amplifying the influence of those locals one knew shared one's views. In all of these ways, *Kēraḷīyam* activists impacted struggles without leading them.

Relatedly, much of the influence of *Kēraḷīyam* activists on people's struggles was directed at means more than ends. The support these activists offered a local campaign in pursuing its goals also nudged, sometimes guided, that campaign toward a certain path. Sometimes this was a matter of explicit strategic decisions. For example, when residents of a predominantly Catholic village found out about government plans to locate an industrial zone there, they called Father Sebastian to help them organize. He guided them in setting up an action council, organizing a torch-led march, and drawing media attention to their opposition. More often, however, the influence of activists' support was more subtle, directed at quotidian aspects of the organizing process. Attempts in Gandhamur to organize nightly meetings or increase female leadership are examples of such influence, but not all impacts were so intentional. The legal contacts offered by *Kēraḷīyam* activists, for example, would affect the kind of legal advice a campaign received and, thus, the legal avenues it pursued.

The multifarious influences of *Kēraḷīyam* activists on struggles have certain regularities, introducing certain similarities into the campaigns and protests in which these activists intervene. Fr. Sebastian, arriving in the village slated for the industrial zone, guided them in organizing a torch-led march, and this march was conducted in a manner that bore similarities to other

marches in which Fr. Sebastian had participated. Or, perhaps, similarities to his notion of what a torch-led march *should* be. The latter, normative sort of similarity was evident in the attempts to influence gender roles in the Gandhamur campaign, an effort in which Dhanya took a lead role. It was not just that Dhanya had seen women take leadership roles in other campaigns; what mattered was that she considered these campaigns to be stronger, better, and more representative of people's struggle. Thus, through their support for people's struggles, *Kēraḷīyam* activists introduced iconicity between actual campaign and protests and ideal people's struggles. This was rarely iconicity in the issues campaigns took up or the explicit aims for which they worked. Rather, it was iconicity in the form of political action—that is, participant roles, leadership styles, tactical repertoires, and other aspects of how campaigns were conducted.

In other words, the interventions of *Kēraḷīyam* activists give diverse campaigns and protests features that make them recognizable as instances of a type of politics. By introducing formal similarities into how campaigns are conducted, activists contribute to the realization of people's struggle as a type of activity that is undertaken in many times and places. The story of conflicting scalar perspectives in Chapter 2 can be seen as a failed attempt at bringing the Gandhamur campaign into conformance with the people's struggle type.

Kēraḷīyam activists were not, by far, the only actors generating the iconicities that hold this people's struggle type-3 together. By the time I conducted my dissertation fieldwork, people's struggle was a widely known, if fluid, genre of politics which received a great deal of coverage by the mainstream media. This was not always the case. According to many activists, the advent of private TV news in the early 2000s, followed by the victory of a high profile campaign against a polluting Coca-Cola plant in 2005, both contributed to widespread public recognition of the people's struggle type. Thus, one does not need to read *Kēraḷīyam* or consult a

Kēraḷīyam activist to have some sense of the key elements—e.g., Action councils, struggle tents, torch-led marches, fasting—that make up a people's struggle. Many campaigns and protests that have had no contact with *Kēraḷīyam* activists adopt the name of people's struggle. There are also other individuals and activist groups, like the Muslim youth organization Justice Now, that regularly intervene in people's struggles and shape them in other ways. Thus, the iconicities of type₃ do not all originate with *Kēraḷīyam* activists; their work is one typifying mechanism that tends to produce certain patterns of political action.

What differentiates the influence of *Kēraḷīyam* activists from other typifying mechanisms are the ways that multiple similarities hang together. Just as the stances of typification-2 mirror the mix of articles in *Kēraḷīyam*, so also the influences of activists in typification-3 enact this same mix of normative positions in actual campaigns and protests. Efforts to promote gender equality and "democratic" meeting practices in Gandhamur are examples of this. But activists also sometimes encouraged locals to take up organic farming and other valued practices found on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam*—in Gandhamur, locals sometimes joked with each other about *Kēraḷīyam* activists' "alternative" views. The magazine's integration of people's struggle with other radical projects was never even remotely achieved, nor attempted, in any actual people's struggle. The magazine had a whole issue about bicycles, for example, but my research assistant Sunil and I were the only ones who ever cycled to the sites of struggles. But *Kēraḷīyam* activists spoke often of their desire to realize such integration more fully, and complained about the lack of recognition in Gandhamur, for example, of the broader cause in which their campaign partook. This vision of a broader, integrated politics of people's struggle, though never realized itself, gave a coherence to their influence on the typification-3 of people's struggles that was distinct from other influences.

Because both the sociological literature on framing and the anthropological literature on recognition and essentialism theorize typification as a representational processes, neither is very helpful for describing the work of *Kēraḷīyam* activists in typification-3. Benford and Snow describe framing as a way of interpreting and representing the "world out there" (2000: 614), but in this case activists are giving shape to the world itself, not only to representations of the world. People's struggle is not only an ideal type, but also a real type.³² Moreover, this shift from typification as representational process to typification as transforming reality also forces a revision of our account of the making of the people's struggle type in ink and paper. If typification-3 generates similarities between actual campaigns and protests, then typification-1 is better described as drawing upon, amplifying, or editing these existing similarities, rather than creating them *ex nihilo*. The world, in other words, is no longer so very "out there."

3.5 Circuits of Motivation

The typification-3 of campaigns and protests as people's struggles sheds new light on typification-1 on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam* and typification-2 in the rain camp. The logic of people's struggle updates as documentation, we noted earlier, presupposes the existence of iconicities between campaigns and protests. Such iconicities also afford Father Sebastian's introduction of himself as someone who spends all his time on people's struggles. Moreover, in describing their motivations for publishing struggle updates and holding rain camps, activists invoked the existence of ongoing people's struggles. This type of political action, they claimed, urgently required documentation. It also inspired them to pursue an alternative way of life. With our account of typification-3, we can now understand how diverse campaigns and protests became instances of people's struggle capable of requiring and inspiring this work.

³² Thanks to Philip Gorski for suggesting this terminology in another context.

At the same time, it is not quite right to say that people's struggles as campaigns and protests pre-existed people's struggles in ink and paper or people's struggles as an activity central to a way of life. The interventions of solidarity organizers that produced iconicity among campaigns and protests were also informed and inspired by *Kēraḷīyam* and the camps. Thus, typification-3 presupposes the processes of typification-2 and typification-1 as much as the latter presuppose typification-3. The iconicity elaborated in each process recapitulates the iconicity already present in the others, so that in each process, the similarities that activists produce are never arbitrary but, rather, always already there.

The notion of real types, then, applies not only to types of political action, but also to ink and paper types and types of activist life. In each process of typification, the pre-existence of people's struggles was part of the motive for the work activists undertook. Adarsh updated readers about people's struggles. Sunny and other activists made people's struggles central to their way of life. Dhanya intervened in people's struggles. In each case, these activities presuppose that people's struggles already exist. If there was no people's struggle type already, then it is hard to see why *Kēraḷīyam* activists would undertake what we have described as typifying work. In each process, the existing people's struggle type also motivates some further work of building iconicity between struggles, whether the latter are ink-and-paper representations, activities defining an activist life, or campaigns and protests.

The motive forces driving the three processes of typification can be diagrammed as in Figure 6. Typification-1, on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam*, renders people's struggles as a consistent narrative of opposition between the people and their others, and tucks this narrative in between articles on cultural critique and alternative lifestyles. In camps and other joint activities, typification-2, activists align with each other in stances that, in turn, align more or less with the

positions taken on the pages of the magazine. This work is, at times, inspired by the magazine, but the magazine is also shaped by the stances of its readers, who are often also its writers. In typification-3, activists enact their aligned stances in their interventions in campaigns and protests, attempting to realize a vision of people's struggle as it is found on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam* and in the shared experience of camps. But the resulting similarities between these campaigns and protests also inspire the work of publishing struggle updates and holding camps. They are what demand documentation and give urgency to the pursuit of "struggle" as a way of life.

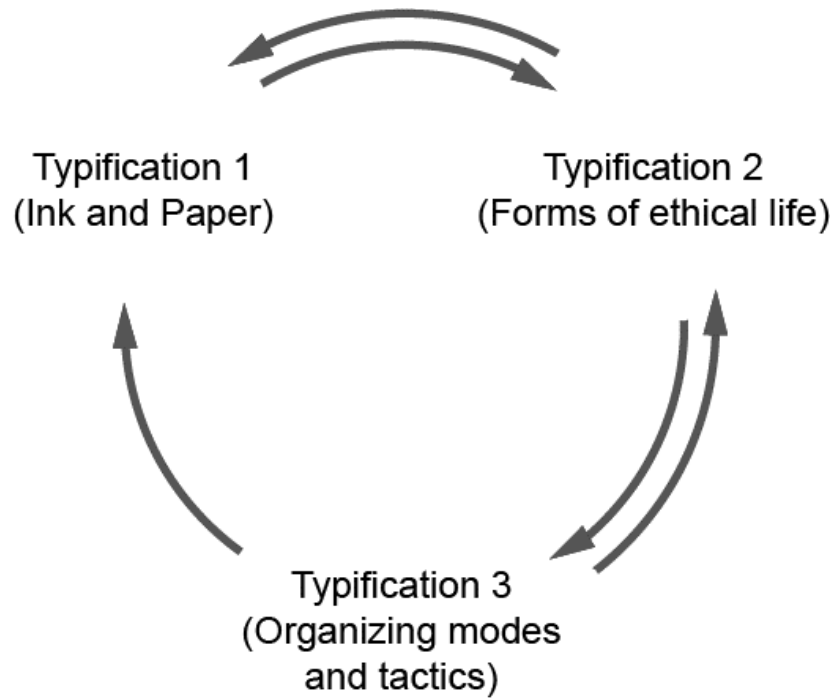


Figure 6: Circuits of motivation in the typification of people's struggles

Notably, in diagramming this tripartite process, the one relation lacking a clear vector of influence is from typification-1 to typification-3. While people's struggle as represented on the pages of *Kēraḷīyam* is vital to the production of the web of moral stances that bind together a collective of activists engaged in people's struggles, it is not apparent that the magazine has any direct impact on campaigns and protests. Adarsh regularly visits various action councils to gather material for struggle updates and other articles, but what he writes rarely makes it back to the sites of these campaigns. Indeed, when one member of the Gandhamur Action Council requested dozens copies of an issue dealing extensively with the campaign, which he hoped to distribute locally, Adarsh resisted. He said that past experience made him doubt that anyone would read them. For the most part, then, it would appear that typification-1 is only taken up in actual campaigns and protests via intervention by members of the activist collective that the magazine helps to produce, that is, via typification-2.

This circuitous model of the forces driving the typification of people's struggle helps to explain how activists can describe people's struggle as already present in the world even as they give so much effort to producing the iconicities that bind it together. At every stage in the typification process, people's struggles are both there and in need of making. Part of this ontological hybridity has to do with the nature of icons. Peirce notes that an iconic sign is fit to be taken as "the same" as its object, even if it is never interpreted that way. Thus, what defines an iconic sign is this naturalness of fit that, when interpreted to be a similarity, is encountered as always already there. *Kēraḷīyam* activists perceive this naturalness of fit among campaigns and protests in part because they, through their interventions as solidarity organizers, have helped to produce it. For the same reason, however, the fit is never so natural as to not require further work. The similarity they encounter between campaigns is real, but it is still also a potential

waiting to be realized. In this hybridity of the people's struggle type between reality and possibility, activists find a vision for the world as it ought to be.

Adarsh's impulse to publish a struggle update on Gandhamur during a low point in the campaign arises from precisely this hybridity of people's struggle between the real and the yet to be realized. For Adarsh, Gandhamur was a people's struggle. At the same time, however, he said he was concerned about the direction the campaign might take now that nearly all solidarity organizers had withdrawn. Adarsh's representation of Gandhamur in the struggle update, which made it conform to a standard format, was consistent with what he understood the campaign to be. However, his motive for publishing the update *then* was less about the Gandhamur campaign was than about what it might become. He was concerned, specifically, that the campaign would be co-opted by party politicians and diverge from the normative model of what a people's struggle ought to be. By putting out the update, Adarsh hoped to keep Gandhamur connected to people's struggle as an activity undertaken by solidarity organizers, to keep it in the circuit of *Kēraḷīyam's* typifying work. Though he believed himself to be documenting what was already there, he also feared that if he stopped representing *Kēraḷīyam* as a people's struggle, then it might also stop being a people's struggle.

3.6 A People's Struggle Movement?

The efficacy of the magazine's typifying work should not be overstated; the circuit of influence I have sketched here is far from tight, and the force by which it draws people's struggle together is countered by other forces pulling in other directions. This is what I encountered in my phone call with Ganesh. Doing fieldwork inside the circuit of *Kēraḷīyam's* work, people's struggle seemed like a stable and unquestioned type—a sort of natural kind. But this naturalness was unsettled when I realized that there were other typification processes working away at the

same materials. Iconicity is not *only* a matter of interpretation, but the inherent qualities of things make many resemblances possible. Any campaign can be made to belong to many types.

Kēraḷīyam's work is never complete because there are always many other actors with their own ways of typing movements as well.

Both the sociological and anthropological literatures on social movements show that the assembly of diverse organizations, campaigns, or uprisings as recognizable members of a larger category is important to the making of a movement. My account of how *Kēraḷīyam* produces iconicity between people's struggles might be read as a story about bringing diverse campaigns and protests into a larger movement. However, the lack of a strategizing SMO driving the typifying work of *Kēraḷīyam* activists makes it a stretch to describe this work as movement-making in the traditional sense. Though there may be strategic moments at any stage of the circuit, such as Adarsh's decision to publish an update on Gandhamur, this is not the coherent, fixed strategy of an SMO—there is no single destination, no one calculus determining all decisions.

In considering whether the processes of typification described here have a role to play in social movement organizing, it will help to consider the work of *Kēraḷīyam* in light of the more explicit movement building efforts of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). As noted in Chapter 1, a small subset of *Kēraḷīyam* associates—five or ten people, depending on how you count—were active members of the NAPM, which had been building a coalition of progressive movements and organizations across India since the early 1990s. In addition, many who read *Kēraḷīyam* or participate in camps sympathize with the NAPM's aims. The NAPM was also directly involved in the production of the map shown in Figure 2 as well as the publication of the "Kerala of Struggle" compendium. Moreover, in a prefatory note in "Kerala of Struggle,"

the NAPMs national convener describes Kerala's people's struggles as a model for its work elsewhere (Patkar, 2010). From this point of view, the campaigns listed in the table of contents are encompassed by a national-level type for which NAPM is a standard bearer.

But this is not the view from the offices of *Kēraḷīyam*. Both Adarsh and Sunny were inspired by the work of national-level NAPM figures and regularly sought contributions from the few *Kēraḷīyam* associates involved in the organization. But while the NAPM website includes *Kēraḷīyam* in a list of its publications, the *Kēraḷīyam* website mentions no such relationship, nor did Sunny and Adarsh ever describe the magazine in this way. When NAPM held its national conference in Kerala in 2012, attendance by Kerala activists was remarkably low. Those who did attend participated only marginally, mingling little with the Hindi-speaking national organizers. Those *Kēraḷīyam* activists who were actively involved in NAPM openly admitted that the organization was weak in Kerala. Only a handful of people's struggles were officially members of the alliance, and the coalition was no more than a list. As our analysis thus far shows, such list-making is important to *Kēraḷīyam*'s work as well, but only insofar as it is connected with other mechanisms of typification.

In describing their reluctance to join NAPM, *Kēraḷīyam* activists explained that they were against forming such organizations in principle. As noted earlier, the notion of the people as a political actor was often defined by a juxtaposition with formally organized institutions. As described in Chapter 1, activists within Kerala's alternative left had long turned to this notion of the people as an alternative to the leftism of the state's many Communist parties. They believed that not only political parties but also NGOs and other durable institutions, even when set up to promote people's politics, would inevitably end up working in their own interests rather than working for the people. Thus, even though many shared NAPM's aims, they were opposed to its

institutional form. It is for these same ideological reasons, arguably, that *Kēraḷīyam* was the most robust, durable institutional framework for these activists' work.

Although the typifying work of *Kēraḷīyam* was not movement making in the coalition sense, it did accomplish some of what NAPM sought to achieve. In particular, because many *Kēraḷīyam* activists were inspired by NAPM's work, the typifying work of the magazine was consistent with the organization's vision for its coalition. In "Kerala of Struggle," we see this vision most perfectly realized, if only in ink-and-paper form. And we can now see how ink-and-paper people's struggle is, to some extent, translated into other forms through building an activist collective and intervening in people's struggles. This work is, in part, what makes it possible for the leader of NAPM to see Kerala as a model for the realization of the coalition's vision. People's struggles are multiplying, even if members of the coalition are not.

In this chapter, I have shown how the *Kēraḷīyam* magazine contributes to the production of "people's struggles" as a type of politics in Kerala. I have argued that activists engage with the people's struggle category as both already real and as a form of politics that *ought* to be realized. Thus, my analysis builds on that of Chapter 2 by showing how the understanding of the Gandhamur campaign as only one instance within a broader movement is rendered compelling both to solidarity organizers and others. I also suggest how their work, in making a particular genre of people's politics available for appropriation by action councils like the one in Gandhamur, influenced the activism of such groups even when solidarity organizers were not directly involved.

In the next chapter, I follow up on the latter point, exploring how the Gandhamur Action Council performed their role as "the people" of people's struggle. I also continue to attend to scale, examining the scalar work required to make a small number of specific people stand in for

the universal collective actor of "the people." My analysis focuses on the ways the Action Council made use of events in public roads to accomplish this feat, and I adopt the metaphor of "the thoroughfare" to re-examine democratic publicity from the vantage point of people's struggle. In doing so, I carry forward my concern with entanglements of ethics and politics, exploring how physical force and evaluation in presentations of the people that are both embodied and mass-mediated at once.

Chapter 4: Public Roads

4.1 Thoroughfare

"I have a doubt..." Sunil said to me as we walked back to our bicycle.

"A doubt?"

"Yes a doubt...Did the fish die, or did they kill the fish?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed an old man standing in the shadow of a shop's metal awning, only a few yards away. He had turned his head to look at us—that's what had caught my attention. He met my gaze, grinning as if he knew me.

"Oh!" I said loudly, "Is *that* how you feel?"

As we pedaled away, I admonished Sunil, my research assistant, to be more careful about when, where, and how loudly he expresses his doubts. Once our bicycle, a tandem, was moving quickly, I asked him if he had seen the man, but he had not. For my part, I had no idea who the man was, or what his position with regard to the campaign against the gelatin factory might be. He could have been anyone.

Sunil was not the only one with doubts about who had killed the fish. We had just come from a provision shop where we had been audience to a lively debate about precisely this topic. The shopkeeper, known to be the husband of an employee in the gelatin factory, had claimed that the discovery of fish bodies floating in an irrigation canal that morning was nothing more than a publicity stunt by the factory's opponents. He said the fish could not have died from pollution because only big fish were dying, but pollution would have killed smaller fish as well. The

protestors, he said, must have bought some dead fish and dumped them in. Several of his customers had contested this, including one man who said he had just come from the canal and had seen many small fish floating to the surface. Such was the talk all along the road that morning. Nonetheless, I was worried about the man who had overheard us. How could we be sure, I asked Sunil, that this man would not relay his doubts right back to the struggle participants? In the road, one has to be careful.

Conducting participant observation on the campaign to shut down the gelatin factory in Gandhamur, Sunil and I, like the campaign participants, spent most of our time in roads. Speeches, marches, rallies, and fasts were conducted in or at the edge of the village's main roads. That morning's fish kill might have happened in the canal behind the factory, but it would be watched from a bridge over the canal. The children of protestors would lay the larger fish in a row atop the short wall of the bridge and a crowd would form and spread along that section of road. TV and newspaper reporters would interview campaign leaders in the road and take footage of the crowd. Passersby would post their own videos to Facebook or YouTube. In the road, dead fish became a public controversy. Thus, to garner media attention and win popular support, the campaign against the gelatin factory, like campaigns and protests throughout Kerala, went to the roads.

The everyday conduct of politics in roads offers one way of rethinking a normative concept that has haunted scholarship on political culture in India for several decades: the liberal public sphere. Scholars seeking to understand Indian democratic culture have searched for the practices of disinterested deliberation that supposedly occur within this sphere, forming the beating heart of public life in Western democracies. While some have hailed pre-colonial traditions of argumentation and debate as India's own analogues of the public sphere (Bayly,

2009; Sen, 2005), others have claimed that the concept simply does not apply to Indian politics, which they say proceeds through patronage and symbolism, not rational public discourse (Banerjee, 2008; Ruud, 2011). Acknowledging that both debate and patronage do happen in India, some have seen fit to describe Indian politics as dichotomous, "split" between public sphere-like communicative practices and the politics of crowds, interest groups, and propaganda (Bayly, 2009; Chatterjee, 2004; Harriss, 2011). But sorting actual Indian politics into these two categories has proven as empirically problematic as the notion of the public sphere itself. Whether one looks at mass media (Jeffrey, 2009), electoral politics (Banerjee, 2007), or coffee shop conversations (Cody, 2011a), it is difficult to see where one could even draw a boundary between the desired practices of the public sphere and the illiberal remainder.

The road-based politics of the Gandhamur campaign suggests a new theory of publicity that avoids re-inscribing the defining contrasts of the public sphere. The publicity of the public sphere is predicated on a separation between the interested relations of families, markets, or party politics and the disinterested relations of rational deliberation (Offe, 2014). But the road is public in a different way. The road is a thoroughfare, a space through which bodies of all sorts pass, and thus a public space insofar as it mixes friends and enemies, kin and strangers—not to mention dead fish, reporters, politicians, and researchers. The thoroughfare mixes the social categories that separate people in other spaces—to get to the temple, the mosque, or the church, one walks through the same roads. Of course, one does not encounter everyone in the road, but one might encounter anyone. As evident in the anxiety I expressed to Sunil above, what makes communication in the road public is not disinterested, universalist speech, but the difficulty of knowing who might be listening. Where the public sphere closes off a communicative space in which one should speak as if everyone is listening, the road exposes the speaker to the

uncertainty that anyone could be listening. By examining how participants in the Gandhamur campaign navigate this uncertainty, we can construct a new account of public action in India.

In a recent article, Francis Cody argues against the tendency to view Indian public life as a "deviation, failed replication, or even crisis" from the perspective of the norms of the liberal public sphere, and recommends that scholars instead ask how "postcolonial publicity" can improve our understanding of actual politics and, even, suggest alternative normative visions for democracy (Cody, 2015, p. 52). Cody is particularly concerned with challenging the disembodied, socially unmarked anonymity of participation in the public sphere, which he follows others in arguing allows a privileged elite to "speak for humanity in general" (Cody, 2015, p. 51; Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002). He makes an initial effort at challenging this account of publicity empirically, presenting three cases in which the politics of (embodied) crowds and (mass-mediated) newspaper publishers and readers are tightly intertwined. However, the difficulty with this line of argument, as Cody himself acknowledges, is that such examples might well be taken to merely confirm that Indian democracy is "immature and lacking in universal norms" (2015, p. 62). Moreover, Cody cautions that any attempt to depict a distinct ethnopolitical model of Indian political norms is only likely to exacerbate this problem, projecting Indian public life as an exotic other to liberalism. What he calls for instead is a search for "a new language of massification that does not presume a world of disembodied strangers" (Cody, 2015, p. 63). I take this chapter to be an attempt at answering this call, albeit with Cody's caution against airtight models of uniquely Indian publicity well in mind.

In various guises, the communicative theory that underpins the public sphere concept has long been central to the promise of democracy. Kant made public discourse a precondition for enlightenment and a fundamental principle for moral judgement (Davis, 1992; Kant, 1996a,

1996b). Building on this normative vision, John Dewey argued that "the problem of the public" is how to improve "the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion" (1984, p. 365). Against Walter Lippman's (1925) argument that public opinion can only coalesce in vague, emotional impulses, Dewey argued that public discourse (especially, face-to-face conversation) could provide the basis for "securing diffused and seminal intelligence" (1984, p. 371). Dialogue and debate were to be tools for making public opinion rational. Habermas (1984; 1989) took up this argument and carried it further, making discussion in magazines and coffee shops the central historical mechanism for the generation of an approximately ideal public sphere in 18th century Europe, and developing a normative theory of language with public rationality as its teleological endpoint. Both Habermas' historiography and his normative vision have been the subject of much debate. Nonetheless, the notion that public discourse can give rise to rational moral judgments remains a crucial tenet of liberal language ideology.

Readers of the burgeoning literature on publics and the public sphere in anthropology³³ will recognize that, as metaphor, roads are not new to this debate. Habermas famously contrasted the rational discussion taking place in London coffee shops with the "pressure of the street" outside; shutting out the road was the very act of enclosure that made liberal publicity possible (J. Habermas, 1989, p. 132; Laurier & Philo, 2007; Montag, 2000). But this defining contrast only makes the campaign in Gandhamur a better site for re-examining "the street" as something more than an "other" to the public sphere. After all, Gandhamur has active tea shop conversations, complete with newspapers, but the tea shops have no doors. Like most other small shops in Kerala, they are open to the road and caught up in the mix and flow of the thoroughfare. Thus, far from an analysis of an alternative non-liberal publicity that is already overdetermined

³³ See Cody (2011b) for a recent review of this literature.

by the dichotomies of liberalism, the Gandhamur campaign is an opportunity to re-examine the logic of separation that underwrites the public sphere idea and explore ethnographically the actual entanglement of bylines and bodies; kin, crowds, and cable news; deliberation and dead fish. In doing so, I take aim not only at the problem of the Indian public sphere, but at the theorization of public rationality generally.

4.2 Events in the Road

When Sunil and I joined the crowd on the bridge that morning, we knew that we were attending a repeat event. Several months before, after over a year of relative stagnancy, another fish kill had reinvigorated the campaign. I had not been in Kerala then, but Sunil and I had seen photos on online news sites of Vijayan and other campaign leaders carrying a huge branch through the middle of the road, strung with dozens of gaping fish. That fish kill had brought new attention to the campaign from around Kerala and new support from among the network of "solidarity organizers" associated with *Kēraḷīyam* magazine. In the following two months, campaign participants held a continuous fast in their tent outside the factory's gate and conducted nightly torchlit marches through the village. They set a deadline for the government to remove the effluent pipe from the factory to the river. As the days passed, regional newspapers reported regularly on the fasting, meetings with officials, and the approaching deadline.

The deadline came and passed. One day shortly after I arrived, about two thousand people, both Gandhamur residents and solidarity organizers, gathered to remove the pipe themselves. Although this did not take place, the conflict came to a head when protesters refused to disperse from in front of the factory gates. The police beat them back with their wooden batons, chasing many all the way into their homes and destroying their belongings. Images of the violence were on every news channel that evening and in every newspaper the next day and for

several days thereafter. There were proclamations of support from politicians and civil society figures. There were daily marches, daily speeches by dignitaries, daily sit-ins and arrests in front of the factory gate. The effluent pipe was broken and flooded a paddy field with factory's waste. There were tours of the pollution for government officials and clashes with workers and police. For more than four months, this wave of activity kept newspaper and television reporters flowing through Gandhamur.

But by the time of the next fish kill—the one Sunil and I rode to see—media attention had begun to wane. There may have been several reasons for this, including a decline in support from solidarity organizers that I discussed in Chapter 2. Regardless of the reasons, however, the wave of activity had passed. Local leaders recognized that in order to draw reporters to Gandhamur, something new had to happen. The flooded paddy field, the fights with workers, the speeches by mid-level politicians—none of that was new anymore. Thus, when the fish floated to the surface of the canal that morning, the Action Council pounced. Vijayan called all of his media contacts. Campaign participants told each other to come down to the bridge and form a crowd. Boys went down to the river to bring up fish and display them on the bridge wall.

For most of Kerala, this is how people's struggles are known; they appear as intermittent reports of fish kills, confrontations with police, broken pipes, leaders arrested for fasting "until death," and speeches by persons of renown—strings of events on TV screens and the pages of newspapers. But this is also, to a large extent, how the campaign in Gandhamur was understood from the inside, by those who conducted such events. The work of the Action Council was closely attuned to coverage in the media, especially on Kerala's dozen Malayalam language news channels. Participants watched the news closely, celebrated increases in coverage, and strategized to bring TV reporters back to the village. Thus, dead fish could not be left floating in

the water; they had to be dangled from a branch that could be carried through the road. They had to be lined up on the bridge wall. To a large extent, Action Council members saw the events of their own campaign as through the lens of a video camera.

Given this orientation to uptake by mass media, to what extent were events in the road brought about by the Action Council's own initiative? Some version of Sunil's doubt ("Did the fish die? Or did they kill the fish"?) was often on my mind, and not only because the Action Council's opponents often made accusations of this sort. Campaign participants staked their hopes on the influence of such events on public opinion. In their own view, they needed to keep TV-worthy things happening in the village. And some events were clearly orchestrated by participants. For example, after the effluent pipe broke, factory workers succeeded in diverting the flow of waste into an irrigation canal and back into the river. But Vijayan led several men in building a dike to channel the flow in a different direction, back into the factory's intake pipe. Ostensibly, the aim of this engineering project was to interfere with the factory's production process, but Vijayan called the TV reporters as well and one channel came out to interview him in front of the newly completed waterworks. Thus, this too became a media event.

In other cases, however, the Action Council's role in orchestrating events was less clear. In the case of the broken pipe, this ambiguity was intentional. Action Council participants generally referred to the event in the intransitive (pipe *potti*, "the pipe broke"), but I did note the tendency of one particularly garrulous participant to use the transitive first, then correct himself. When I asked a solidarity organizer point blank whether the Action Council had broken the pipe, he smiled wryly and replied "could be."

In the case of several key events, however, it was clear that Action Council members could only have had a limited role in bringing them about. In the case of the police baton charge,

for example, they might have provoked the police, but they could not have known that the police would respond as they did. And it was only because the brutality of the police response was so rare in contemporary Kerala that it received so much media attention. Thus, both the police violence and its effects on the campaign were largely out of the Action Council's control.

Even when the Action Council was not in control of events in the road, it was still active. When events were slowing, there were efforts to orchestrate or capitulate them. When something happened, there was the work of displaying it to visitors and the mass media. Vijayan, the lead organizer of the Action Council, was nearly always riding around on his motorbike, always visiting someone, always on the phone. When he was not in the thick of a crowd, or giving an interview, or supervising some mischievous engineering project, he was meeting with other leaders to plot the next move. He slept only a few hours a night, and his health deteriorated significantly during the time I was studying the campaign. Some solidarity organizers criticized this way of running things, saying that the campaign lacked longer-term strategy. But even his critics recognized that Vijayan had a gift for mobilizing people; when he called, a crowd would come.

Throughout the ups and downs of events in the road, the struggle tent offered an element of continuity. The tent was built like a stage—a raised platform with three walls, opening onto the road—and it served as a stage for speeches, visits from supporters, or hunger strikes. People said it was built on Vijayan's ancestral property, which happened to lie just adjacent to the factory, but its platform and awning reached far out into the road itself. When a famous politician or civil society figure came, a podium was set up on the platform with two rows of chairs behind it. Chairs for the audience were set up in front of the tent and on the far side of the road, and often a crowd would grow around these chairs, blocking the road entirely. Most such programs

would begin with a short procession to the gate of the factory, where slogans and demands for justice could be addressed directly to the closed gates. The managers never came to the gate to hear these demands, and no one expected they would; the audience that mattered was in the road.

But even when there were no official events, the tent was still a stage. Sitting together on the tent's platform was considered an important way of making protest visible. This notion was described in the idiom of Gandhian *satyāgraha*, a practice of continuously occupying a place, often while fasting, as a way of publicly asserting opposition to an injustice. When the Action Council conducted relay fasts, it was essential that the fasting person should always remain in the tent. But even when fasts were not going on, it was considered better to keep the tent occupied at all times as a sign that the struggle persisted. On most nights, at least one or two unmarried men would sleep there, and in the daytime elderly men would sit out in chairs in front of the platform and chat. The tent was a gathering place, especially in the evenings after dinner, when wives, mothers, and children would join the men. During the times when struggle events were most frequent, these gatherings were also more regular and better attended.

The tent was a place for putting the campaign on display, but it was also a place for observing. Whether during long, lazy afternoons or evening gatherings, it was common to see cell phones being passed around, as people shared photos, video, and commentary about the campaign from Facebook, YouTube, or news sites. If a magazine had covered the campaign, someone would eventually bring it to the tent; there were small stacks of them on a table on one side of the platform. Newspaper coverage was passed around as well, and media coverage of the campaign was one of the most common topics of conversation in the tent. Thus, if the tent was a place for the campaign to be seen, it was also a place to watch the campaign—to see how it was being seen.

As with the publicity of the road generally, occupying the tent was public in the sense that one might be seen by anyone. The road in front of the factory was the most traveled road in the village, and anyone might pass by. Thus, if one chose to sit in the tent, one was also more or less choosing to be known as a participant in the campaign. People in Gandhamur talked like this: if asked whether so and so was a member of the Action Council, people would often say whether they had seen so-and-so in the tent, or in the tent recently. For this reason, the tent held risk. One might, for example, be seen by a relative who was opposed to the campaign. I met several people who said they supported the campaign but were not interested in going to the tent because they had family members who worked for the factory.

There was another reason to occupy the tent continuously; some struggle participants worried that if it was left unwatched the factory workers or the police would destroy it. Indeed, on the day the police beat the protesters, they also demolished the tent entirely. Thus, just as with the Action Council's diversion of polluted water into the factory's intake pipe, the presentation of the campaign for public display was always an embodied effort, the success of which was always contingent upon the balance of physical forces. The relations between semiotic mediation and immediate physicality were complex and the dependencies bidirectional. Sitting in front of the gate was a way of displaying defiance to the TV cameras, but it was also a physical obstacle to the entry of trucks. A broken pipe slowed the production process in the factory, but it also released smells and blackish gunk that were useful for persuading visiting government officials (see Chapter 7). Breaking the pipe was a mechanism for mediatizing the impacts of the factory's waste, but keeping the broken pipe flowing required scuffles with factory workers who wanted to seal it up.

Thus, the tactics of the Gandhamur campaign take us far afield from the supposedly

disembodied deliberation of the public sphere. In the road, public display is always the display of particular bodies, whether they be human bodies, water bodies, or the putrid bodies of dead fish. And this should not be surprising, given that all media are material things, and human semiosis is a necessarily physical and embodied process (Keane, 2005). Indeed, if embodiment and materiality are incompatible with the normative vision for discourse in the public sphere, they are nonetheless central to the bourgeois public sphere as a historical occurrence, even by Habermas' own account. Thus, in and of itself, the physicality of politics in the road only places us outside of the liberal imaginary to the extent that the latter is, in fact, imaginary.

What distinguishes the publicity of the road from that of the public sphere is not the mere fact of materiality, however, but the possibility that physical force may impinge upon the force of reason. As Cody notes, fear of the irrational violence of crowds has long served as a foil for utopic visions of public discourse extricated from bodies (Cody, 2015, p. 55; Tarde, 1969). As we have seen, some forms of violence were crucial to events in the road. Violence might be required to protect the tent or keep the broken pipe open. It might also elicit a police baton charge that could, in turn, garner widespread popular support. Such tactics may seem to exemplify the insidious "pressure of the street" of which Habermas warned.

Just as the Gandhamur campaign's tactics of public display cannot be carried out without bodies, however, so violent tactics were always dependent upon the persuasive potential of mass mediation. This was not the irrational violence of a mob. Force—especially the use of violence, but also of other forms of physical force, such as property destruction—was a calculated risk, and the chief calculation concerned whether or not an act could be represented as just force. In the final analysis, the road was a site of ethical evaluation, and the logic of force as campaign strategy was subordinate to a logic of accountability. However, to fully appreciate the interplay

of force and display in the campaign, it will help to first look more closely at the evaluative mechanisms of the public to which the campaign rendered itself accountable.

4.3 Channeling Publicity

There are four tea shops in Gandhamur, but the busiest by far is Sujit's. Sujit has been running the tea shop for over thirty years now, and his mother and father ran it together before him. Every morning at seven or so, he puts that day's newspaper on the table, lifts the big metal shutter facing the road, and men begin to trickle in. Older, retired men arrive first, a small cohort of regulars, the same every day. By eight, the middle-aged men begin to arrive—carpenters, laborers, and clerks mostly, with the occasional business owner or doctor. They come singly, not in pairs or threes, and take their seats on the benches that line either side of the long, narrow room. Dosa's are available, but most men take only tea, made the usual way with lots of milk and sugar, in the little glasses that one finds at every tea shop. Sometimes Sujit serves the tea himself, but usually there is someone to help him—a task exchanged for the morning's cup of tea.

The newspaper is divided into sections, which circulate around the room individually. Newspaper reading is a dominant activity in the shop, but no one is in a hurry about it. There is no calling dibs, and men only rarely ask about the availability of a particular section. Those who read are generally content to read whatever is available, even if it is only the classifieds. The pace of conversation is similarly relaxed. A man might comment on the weather, an upcoming festival, or news of a lottery win in a nearby village. Usually, such conversation starters are taken up for a few turns at most, and that with the men seated beside the first speaker. Conversation that crosses the room to the other bench is rarer, sometimes only a few times per hour. But if a man comes to the tea shop looking for such conversation he will surely get it. And there are certain men who regularly do just that.

Biju, the one member of the Action Council who regularly visits the tea shop, is this sort of man; he talks loudly and enjoys getting others talking loudly as well. When he is around, there will probably be some discussion of recent events in the conflict between the Action Council and the factory, or even debate about whether the factory should be closed. But when he is not there, these topics rarely come up. If there is an article about the factory in a newspaper, someone might point out that it is there, but most likely there will be no discussion of what the article says, how it represents the factory or the campaign, or what the implications might be for the ongoing conflict. No discussion, that is, of the sort that happens in the struggle tent. When I try to raise these topics in the shop, they receive only weak replies. When I asked about the best road to a nearby town, I heard about the history of road building over the last fifty years. But my best conversations about the factory were out on the front stoop, sharing a cigarette, or back in the kitchen with Sujit, not in the shop itself.

Sujit himself is a strong supporter of the campaign. He used to go down to the tent now and then, and he still donates money regularly. But he is not a man to talk loudly about it. One day, when I joined him in the kitchen, he explained to me that there are both campaign supporters and opponents who come to his shop, so he does not talk about it much. In particular, two of the old men who come early every morning are factory retirees. When they are around, he does not talk about the factory. At first, I thought he was saying, as an auto rickshaw driver told me once, that it is better for businessmen to avoid getting involved in politics because one might lose clients. But he explained that this was not his reasoning at all.

"They all know what my politics are when it comes to the company," he said, laughing, "It's just that I don't say anything. What's the point in saying anything against it? For me it's not so much about business. But why should I disturb them?"

He turned back to the stove and flipped a few dosas.

"Did anything like that ever happen?" I asked.

"No, no, no...maybe because we do not really talk much about politics here."

This statement surprised me because Kerala is known for having active and abundant political discourse. As noted in Chapter 1, political scientists and development scholars have written about this, but it is also part of Malayalis' own self-imaginary. Some complain about it and others take it as a point of pride, but no one thinks of Kerala as a place where people do not participate in, let alone talk about, politics. But Sujit meant what he said in a different way.

"Let's say we four people are all LDF or all UDF," he said, referring to the two major party coalitions in Kerala, "Then we'll talk politics, but if someone from the other faction is there, then we won't talk...[when it's just us] we'll say that guy is with them, that guy's not correct, but when everybody is all together, we'll act like there's no problem at all."

Sujit flips a few more dosas, then adds, "Really that's not how it should be. People should just speak openly...hey?"

He shoots me a grin, then laughs. I laugh too and tell him I am not so sure.

"Couldn't there be problems if people speak openly?" I ask.

"The real gentleman is someone who speaks openly, right?" He says, still laughing, "I know that."

"But couldn't there be problems with that too?"

"They can do a lot of harm, the people who talk openly. Right? Nobody likes people who talk about things openly..."

His voice trailed off as he turned back to the stove.

Sujit's account of why he does not speak openly (*tuṛannu paṛayuka*, a compound of the verbs "to open" (*tuṛakkuka*) and "to say" (*paṛayuka*)) about his support for the gelatin factory campaign resonates with the communicative anxieties at the heart of the public sphere concept. This notion of speaking openly combines two senses found in Malayalam dictionaries; that of speaking frankly and that of speaking in the open. Sujit is not merely averse to saying what he really thinks. After all, the same views that he withheld when in the tea shop, he was now explaining to me in detail in the kitchen. Rather, Sujit did not wish to express himself frankly in certain communicative situations, which he elsewhere described as speaking "publicly" (*parasyamāyitt*). We might say that he did not want to speak openly in the open.

Sujit was worried that he might lose business but, more fundamentally, he was simply worried about disturbing people. His relations to those who frequent his shop are complex and enduring; they are economic relations, but also neighborly relations, friendly relations, even kin relations. The factory retirees were his father's customers before they were his own. In this social context, openly disagreeing with someone is not just a matter of opposing one opinion to another. It could have consequences for all of these other relationships.

The public sphere is meant to counter such anxieties; it is a social context in which opinions can be openly stated because they are not entangled with the relations of economic exchange, of kinship, or of state authority. In his analysis of the emergence of a public sphere in 18th-century Britain, for example, Habermas describes coffee shop conversations in which differences of social status were systematically disregarded, a practice meant to create a setting in which "the best argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy" (J. Habermas, 1989, p. 36). Likewise, he argues that the circulation of opinions in literary journals effectively disconnected arguments from the social embeddedness of the persons who constructed and

debated them (J. Habermas, 1989, p. 41). This logic of disentanglement and disinterestedness underwrites the capacity of the public sphere to engender rational debate; by separating relations between arguments from other social relations, the public sphere is imagined to free the force of reason from countervailing forces such as authority, sentiment, economic interest, or violence.

A key communicative principle underwriting the possibility of such disentangled discourse is the notion that in the public sphere, one addresses everyone. Habermas argues that the emerging public spheres of Britain, France, and Germany were characterized by the notion that everyone "had to *be able* to participate," even if low literacy rates made it obvious that everyone did not (J. Habermas, 1989, pp. 37, 38). Building on this account, Warner argues that public speech is in principle oriented to "indefinite strangers," regardless of whether the speaker actually knows her audience or not (Warner, 2002, p. 74). Participants in the public sphere take each other as strangers in this limited sense, addressing one another without regard to any social specificity—as if they *could* be heard by anyone. Such indeterminacy of address, as Cody notes, stands in for the notion that public speech is universal in concern (Cody, 2015). Insofar as participants in the public sphere are stripped of social specificity, their utterances are taken to be unencumbered by "private" interests associated with race, class, gender, or other dimensions of social position. For Habermas, this ideological framework affords the possibility of deliberation in the interest of all.

As illustrated by the old man who listened in on my research assistant Sunil's suspicions about the dead fish, talking in the road also has a certain indeterminacy of address. That road in particular, which runs past the struggle tent and the factory gates, is the main thoroughfare in Gandhamur—anyone might happen by. The same is true of the shops lining the road, which, like Sujit's tea shop, are generally constructed with three concrete walls and a large metal shutter

spanning the width of the fourth, road-facing wall. Awnings stretch out over stacks of soda bottles or crates of vegetables, luring passersby into their shade. Just as the old man overheard Sunil, so we had overheard the debate in the provisions shop a few minutes before. As in the public sphere, there is a sense in which, in the road and its shops, one must speak as if one could be overheard by anyone.

However, the indeterminacy of speaking in roads and roadside shops has nothing to do with stranger relations. At least, not in Gandhamur. Though not a secluded village, Gandhamur is a small place, and not a place that many strangers have reason to go.³⁴ But walking, cycling, or driving in the road, one might run into any of these known people—there lies the indeterminacy. People are not stripped of their social specificity, but it becomes more difficult to address them in their specificity because other people are likely to overhear. As Sujit suggests in his anecdote about the LDF and UDF party members, such mixedness does prompt people to adjust their speech, but these adjustments do not include disregard for social position. On the contrary, Sujit describes people—including himself—avoiding controversial topics altogether in mixed company.

Nonetheless, debate does occur. When the shopowner declared that there were no small fish floating to the surface, his customers challenged him. Biju, the outspoken campaign participant that frequented Sujit's tea shop, always found plenty of other patrons ready to take him on—his own uncle first among them. Indeed, in Gandhamur, these are arguably the spaces in which such debates are most likely to occur. The mixed sociality of these spaces makes such

³⁴ An important exception are the migrants who come from Tamil Nadu, Bihar, and other states to work in the village's two brickmaking factories. But the migrants are strangers of a very different sort than Warner and others associate with the public sphere. They do not speak Malayalam, and they generally keep to themselves. If it is true that the other residents of Gandhamur address migrants as strangers, what is truer is that they rarely address them at all.

debate possible. But this same mixing of kin and customers, friends and foes, young and old, also makes openly disagreeing with others potentially risky.

The risk of voicing his opinions was not, according to Sujit, the risk of being found out. In describing his aversion to "speaking openly" (*tuṛannu paṛayuka*), Sujit also employs the adverb "publicly" (*parasyamāyiṭṭ*), one antonym of which is "secretly" (*rahasyamāyiṭṭ*). And yet, he makes clear that his aversion to speaking publicly is not about keeping secrets. Sujit was certain that everyone already knew that he opposed the factory, even if he never voiced this opinion in their presence. Thus, his concern about disturbing the factory retirees was not a matter of whether or not they knew his opinion. Rather, it was a question of whether they heard his opinion from his own lips or, alternatively, via some other communicative channel.

Sujit's belief that everyone knew his views was consistent with the claims of many others in Gandhamur. Both supporters and opponents of the factory professed that they knew with certainty where everyone else stood with regard to the campaign to shut it down. In my own experience, people's knowledge of others' opinions (at least, as those opinions were expressed to me) was often less complete than they believed. Nonetheless, those who spoke to me "secretly" often only shared what was widely known. Numerous times during my research, I was pulled aside by someone in the road and taken to their house, where this person regaled me with the "real" story behind the factory and the campaign against it. In every instance, I later found out that this person's secret story was well known to the campaign participants, who offered their own counter-story when necessary, complete with details relevant to the trustworthiness of the storyteller. It would be too much to say that there were no secrets in Gandhamur. But there were definitely an abundance of public secrets.

Likewise, there were many who supported the factory but were not willing to be seen

marching through the roads or sitting in the struggle tent. Chief among these were campaign supporters whose kin were employed in the factory. But this was not, generally, because they understood their views to be secret. Rather, it was a question of openly displaying those views in the road.

Even campaign participants, who did choose to voice their views in the open, often spoke of the challenges they faced in doing so. For example, Sunitha described how her family members initially argued with her for getting involved with the campaign. Many of them also felt strongly about the pollution from the factory, but they did not think she should be marching in the street about it, particularly because a couple of her kin were factory employees. Likewise, Biju's outspokenness was, by his own account, a source of embarrassment to his family. Though his uncle Jacob laughed off his challenges, the two of them were not on good terms. Jacob knew there were others in the family who were in favor of the campaign, but none who confronted him so directly.

Ideologies in Gandhamur about speaking openly stand in stark contrast to the speech situation supposedly facilitated by the indeterminacy of the public sphere. The more a social setting is "open" to a wide variety of people, the less "openly" people talk. Thus, in the tea shop and the road, most people exercise great care in how they speak, often avoiding disagreement, let alone criticism of one another's views. At the same time, in the language ideology of Sujit and other Gandhamur residents, keeping quiet is not necessarily understood to be a barrier to the flow of information and opinions. Word gets around without getting out in the open. Thus, discussion in Sujit's tea shop is not a mere reversal of that in the coffee shops of Habermas.

The notion that reticence in public settings does not hinder the flow of information and opinions is underpinned, pragmatically, by the entanglement of social relations I described

above. Multiple and various relations between people in Gandhamur facilitate many points of communicative contact, or channels, along which knowledge of others' activities and opinions can travel. Thus, although the gelatin factory itself was separated from the road on all sides by a high concrete wall, developments inside the factory were almost immediately known to campaign participants. Despite their differences, those who supported the campaign openly were friends and kin with at least some workers. They were also linked to those inside the factory by the many who supported the campaign less openly. Thus, the dense web of relatedness in the village made the flow of information and opinions difficult to control, giving a sense that any communication held at least some indeterminacy of address.

In this limited sense, then, all communication in Gandhamur was partially "public." What was not said in the road could be expected, nonetheless, to make its way to a "general" audience anyway. Given this expectation of indeterminacy, the road and the tea shop stand out as marked instances of a general condition. A high degree of indeterminacy in all communication is presumed by the expectation that opinions will be known regardless of whether they are uttered in roads or tea shops. Nonetheless, in these settings the ideological presumption of indeterminacy is more salient. Sujit feels he can tell me his opinions frankly in the kitchen, but not in the tea shop, even though he knows that those opinions will make their way into the shop eventually—and, indeed, he assumes they already have. But in the kitchen, his speech is nonetheless not in risk of causing disturbance.

To speak publicly (*parasyamāyitṭ*), then, is not so much a matter of indeterminate address as such, but rather a matter of which settings are ideologically marked as indeterminate. Without question, the selection of the road as a public space is afforded in part by a relatively high degree of possibility for words to travel in unanticipated ways. This is not only a matter of the actual

mixing of people in the road, but also the possibility of remediation. Thus, what worried me about the man who overheard Sunil's comments was not that he was unknown to me, but rather that I could not be sure whether he would serve as a channel back to the campaign. Indeed, that he seemed to express some acquaintance with me made me suspect that I might have met him in connection with the campaign. That the road and its shops are places where such uncertainties prevail no doubt motivates the selection of these places as particularly risky for "speaking frankly."

It is important to understand that this selection of roads as "public" is in no way motivated, let alone determined, by the very fact of roads. Rather, the road as a public thoroughfare must be understood as a complex social fact composed of historically specific routines of social practice in the road, zoning laws, and architectural patterns. In Kerala, some of the first struggles *in* the roads were struggles *for* the roads. In the late nineteenth century, the practice of caste unapproachability—in which those from lower castes were forbidden to come within a certain distance, or sometimes even within sight, of members of higher castes—was widespread in Kerala (Namboodiri, 1999). Those of the lowest castes, who were prohibited from allowing themselves to be seen by the highest castes, could only travel roads with great difficulty, calling ahead of themselves continually to warn any who might be coming the other way. Thus, even when they did travel the roads, the narrow linearity of the thoroughfare did not bring these bodies together. Instead, lower castes would step down from the road to let higher castes pass. When the lower castes began organize in opposition of caste discrimination in the early twentieth century, it is not surprising that marches were central to their politics; claiming the road was itself one of the most powerful assertions of rebellion (Lemercinier, 1984, p. 208).

It is possible to see the arrival of publicness in the road more negatively, however, as a

story of walling off, rather than opening up. This was brought home to me when an older environmental activist and I were walking back to his home for an interview. On the way, he complained that the road was inaccessible in places because of ongoing construction to expand and pave it. But he complained even more that we had to use the road at all. When he was younger, he said, one could simply walk through people's yards. He spoke fondly of how one would greet and chat with one's neighbors as one went; in this way, he said, walking was productive of community. But now, he pointed out, nearly all of the yards in his neighborhood have walls or fences around them, barring passage, setting property off as private. This is true in Gandhamur as well. More affluent homes often had walls high enough to obstruct visibility from the road, but even smaller homes usually had stone walls, or at least a hedge or barbed wire fence. Like the old environmentalist, anyone over twenty could remember a time when such walls were uncommon, but few expressed such nostalgia—building a wall was considered essential to building a house, a powerful marker of social status (see Chapter 6). Thus, the indeterminate addressivity described here may still be argued to depend upon a certain logic of enclosure, but here we have the enclosure of domestic spaces against the mixing of the road, rather than enclosure of a public sphere against the heterogenous and interested relations that prevail elsewhere.

The indeterminate addressivity of talk in the road can, then, be understood as both an architectural and ideological channeling of the more general condition of indeterminacy into certain communicative scenes. In this respect, the ideological mechanism is clearly the more potent. For while the road might be said to accomplish some mixing of nearly everyone in Gandhamur—and thus be a space in which anyone might overhear, the same cannot be said for the tea shop. After all, though Sujit considered his tea shop "public" (*parasyam*), it was not really

so heterogenous as the road itself. In practice, those who enter the shop are only a small subset of those whom one might encounter in the road. In Gandhamur as elsewhere, women very rarely take their tea in tea shops, which are busiest in the morning hours when women are expected to be occupied with domestic tasks. While male customers hold nearly the full range of class positions in Gandhamur, there are certainly far fewer representatives from upper tiers, who prefer to take tea at home. The youngest regulars are in their thirties, and the large majority are old enough to complain that the new generation only cares for beer. Thus, while opinion regarding the factory may be as diverse as anywhere, the range of people who might overhear these opinions is far from unbounded, at least in a demographic sense. Thus, as in Habermas' public sphere, the marking of certain communication indeterminate in addressivity did not require that communicative contact actually be unbounded.

In Gandhamur, what I have called the publicity of the thoroughfare disconnects the flow of information and opinions from the notion of "speaking openly." Certain scenes of communicative contact are selected as public, but indeterminacy is everywhere, and information and opinion are understood to flow more freely through non-public channels than through public speech. This is surely in part because it is in public settings—which are regarded as both ideologically and practically more open—that people are understood to be most reticent about their views. This reticence may be motivated in part by a desire to keep opinions from being known—as in the case of Sunil and I—but more often it is a matter of not disturbing social relations. As Sujit says, "Nobody likes people who talk about things openly."

The staging of events in the road, described in the previous section, appears to run directly counter to this discourse of the dos and don'ts of publicity. Such events are explicitly designed as displays of "speaking openly in the open." To understand why the Action Council undertakes

this type of display, we need to look more closely at how campaign participants maneuvered to manipulate the multiple interested mediations of publicity in the road.

4.4 Staging the people

When Sunil and I arrived at the roadbridge, we were told that we had missed everything. The fish were still there on the bridge wall, short and long laid side-by-side in the midday sun, and they were putting out a cloud of raw stench. A crowd of around thirty people was there as well, not counting the many boys scampering down to the canal and back, shuttling more evidence up into the open light. It was Sunday, so the kids can stick around as long as they like, and no one was in too much of a hurry to slow their car for a look, and a whiff, as they passed. But everyone said the real action was over. Earlier, there had been TV crews from several major stations, and a couple of newspaper reporters to boot, but now they had all gone. Vijayan had been there as well, giving interviews, but he left when the reporters had what they needed. And government officials were not likely to come out on a Sunday. So, we were told, nothing more was likely to happen.

But it was not long before another TV crew pulled up, and the whole scene surged with renewed energy. As soon as the cameraman and reporter stepped out onto the bridge, Rahul began to curse at them, telling them to pack up and go home; their channel never tells the truth about the gelatin factory anyway, Rahul said, so what was the point of even coming down here? The cameraman quietly went about his business, avoiding eye contact, but the reporter with him was not so unflappable. I never heard what he said, but in only seconds everyone standing around had converged in a ring around him, cinching him in. Those closest were shouting, while others elbowed in to get a view. Several smartphones hovered above it all, angled down at the action.

The reporter would not back down. He was from Kerala TV, which is owned by a news corporation that many in Gandhamur believed had not covered the campaign fairly. In answer to these accusations, he retorted that he had covered many people's struggles, but none where the people acted so badly. He accused the campaign participants of acting like hired ruffians (*goondas*). The more he spoke, the more the ring around him thickened and tightened.

Vijayan arrived on his motorbike and forced his way through the crowd. Jaison, the politician from downstream village whose shifting role I described in Chapter 2, was close behind. At first it seemed that they were trying to restrain Rahul and quiet the crowd, but then they took up the quarrel themselves, accusing the reporter in much the same language as others had. The two men took turns holding one another back even as each performed ever greater heights of outrage.

"Do you know who I am?" Jaison shouted, his huge white-clad form towering over the increasingly small-looking reporter

"Do you know who I am?" snapped back the adamant man.

Then, with no warning, Jaison spun around in fury.

"Turn off that camera!" he shouted, and the ring of bodies broke as he charged through, one massive hand cocked to strike. He went right for Sunil, who stumbled backward, stuttering apologies and trying to hide the hand that still held our video camera.

"I told you to stop sneaking around filming things!"

Sunil was quiet as we pedaled home that day. I could find little to say myself. I was the one who had told him to film the argument on the bridge, but how could I have expected Jaison to take such offense? We were in the road, after all. There had been several people recording the action with their phones, as there so often were. Even the reporter's cameraman had had his

camera on his shoulder the whole time—I was sure he was getting everything. But I knew none of that would console Sunil. We went to bed that evening without discussing it and, the next morning, Sunil told me he did not want to go with me to Gandhamur anymore.

But while I was preparing to set out alone, Vijayan called. He wanted to know if we still had any footage from the day before, particularly any footage of him and Jaison quarreling with the reporter from Kerala TV. I hedged, telling him that we still had some, but that we were planning to delete that footage because of Jaison's reaction. To my surprise, he asked me, instead, if we could make a copy for him. He told me that the Kerala TV reporter was spreading lies about how the struggle participants had attacked him, and they wanted to use the footage to prove that it was the reporter that had been in the wrong. Under Vijayan's guidance, Sunil made a CD with a selection of footage that was to the reporter's disadvantage, which was delivered to management at Kerala TV later that day. In the weeks that followed, Sunil and I were thanked countless times for recording the fight in the road that day. Jaison sung our praises loudest of all, telling everyone that if it was not for our video that reporter might have turned all the media against them. Thereafter, we were often asked to take video of important struggle events. Jaison, especially, had us record many of his speeches, which he would post to his personal website.

For the Gandhamur struggle, the road is a site of both opportunity and risk. It offers space enough for a crowd to gather, but, more importantly, it is a space where a crowd can be seen. A primary audience for events in the road can be drawn from passing traffic, but there are also many secondary audiences. When TV crews came to Gandhamur, they tended to stay in the roads; they drove in, shot what they could, and drove back. Moreover, photos and videos of what happened in the road inevitably made their way to Facebook and YouTube, courtesy of the smartphones that were rapidly becoming ubiquitous among Gandhamur's youth. These

opportunities for mediatization—particularly by the TV news channels—accounted for most of the purpose of events in the road as far as many campaign participants were concerned. The real event was not the dead fish, nor the crowd, but the footage of both.

Not all TV crews were alike; some could be expected to broadcast sympathetic displays while others were seen as corrupted by the influence of the company that owned the gelatin factory. Vijayan and Jaison often made phone calls to request coverage from their favorite journalists, but a dead fish in the sun will attract flies of all kinds. The Action Council put much of its energy into being seen, and a visit from a TV channel was generally seen as a victory. But displays were not only meant to attract attention; they were meant to attract evaluation. If the events in the road were not represented in the desired way—whether via newspapers, TV news, or social media—then mediatization had as much potential to harm the campaign as to benefit it. Thus, concern that the campaign should be seen positively led Rahul and others to attempt to drive the Kerala TV reporter away.

Just as the publicity of the road is not merely a function of indeterminate addressivity, so the opportunities presented by the road are not only a matter of reaching a large audience. The road, as a public space, offered an opportunity for a particular *kind* of display. If the road was ideologically marked as a primary channel for indeterminate address, so displays in the road were also marked as displays aimed at an indeterminate audience—i.e., at the general public. The road, then, was a proper site for the performance of public appeals. It was, specifically, a site for the performance of a desire to address anyone who might hear.

What makes the indeterminate addressivity of displays in the road powerful for the campaign is also what makes this addressivity dangerous for most other evaluative communication. Like Sujit, most people are cautious about making evaluative statements "in the

open," where anyone might hear. Open disagreement about controversial topics like the gelatin factory can disturb social relations. It is more prudent, most of the time, to avoid such topics, especially since one's opinions are able to move along other channels without the same social friction. But these high relational stakes also mark marches, roadside speeches, or displays of dead fish as communicative events of great import. They exhibit a willingness to disregard the risks of not tailoring one's words to one's audience. The campaign participants, we must infer, care so much about their message that they are willing to take those risks. They are willing to speak openly in the open.

In other words, events in the road perform a certain brand of disinterestedness. Earlier I noted that speech in the road, as in the tea shop, is not by any means disinterested. Though addressivity may be highly indeterminate in these settings, actors respond to this indeterminacy by carefully managing their speech, or even becoming silent, not by speaking as if they do not care who hears. As should be clear from the vignette above, the same is true for events in the road. Campaign participants do care who their audience is, and who mediates their displays before that audience, and they do their best to manage whatever aspects of the mediatization process come within their grasp. Thus, at one moment Jaison wanted no more video, and at the next he could not seem to get enough. Nonetheless, the point of this management is to project an image of disinterested display—in this case, an image of outrage at the injustice of dead fish in the canal, an injustice that must be exposed for all to see.

This performance of indeterminacy bears some resemblance to the indeterminate address of Habermasian publicity. When campaign participants take to the road, they enter a zone where, according to local language ideology, anyone might hear. By seeking out this exposure, they place themselves in the position of those who want everyone to hear—that is, they become those

who speak universally, not on the basis of ties to kin, friends, or neighbors, but simply on the basis of the justice of their cause. In other words, as in the public sphere, it is supposedly the very fact of exposure to an indeterminate audience that makes the speakers shed their own social particularity and present their cause in a universal way. They stand before the TV cameras not as particular people with particular social ties, but simply as "the people."

Of course, as should be clear by now, the participants in the Gandhamur campaign are not disinterested, universal subjects. But the road affords them an opportunity to present themselves in this way. Laclau has pointed out that portrayals of the people are always misrepresentations; any collective actor, no matter how numerous its constituents, is always only some portion of the people, never the people as a whole (Laclau, 2005, pp. 71, 72). Rancière, reasoning along similar lines, argues that identification with the whole of the people could only be made by those "who have no part" (Rancière, 1999, p. 9). The people, he argues, are defined not by their particularity, but only "in the name of the wrong done them by the other parties" (Rancière, 1999, p. 9). Likewise, the Gandhamur campaign participants attempt to stand for the people not by virtue of large numbers but by stripping their appeal of particularity, presenting themselves exclusively as those wronged by the factory, by the state, or by certain news corporations. The place-based notion of "the people" described in Chapter 2 follows this logic; people's struggles are not identified with any particular party, identity group, or other particular interest, but as the political action of all those belonging to a particular place. And, following Rancière, they are those wronged by pollution, displacement—that is by the impact of some party upon the unmarked inhabitants of a place.

To clarify this point, it may help to contrast the Gandhamur Action Council's events in the road with the road politics of Kerala's major political parties, which are capable of

orchestrating marches, rallies, and road blocks at a far vaster scale. Despite the involvement of large numbers in such events—sometimes flooding the roads of whole cities with bodies or calling a *hartal* to close shops and stop vehicular traffic across the state—they were often derided as the machinations of the party itself, as opposed to the actions of the people. Parties were widely reported to pay people to come to their marches. Likewise, those who enforced *hartals* were sometimes said to be hired *goondas*, or, alternatively, to simply be young party workers forcing the will of the party on the people. Whether one considered any particular party's demonstrations to be representative of the people's interests was largely dependent upon one's own party affiliation. But as noted in Chapter 1, everyone recognized a distinction between "struggles," (*samarāṇṇaḷ*), which connoted the road politics of parties, and "people's struggles" *janakīya samarāṇṇaḷ*. The prior were widely denounced as a nuisance for the people (*janaṇṇaḷ*), who needed to go places, while the latter were considered an exception—a use of road politics on the people's behalf, rather than at their expense.

However, while "people's struggles" as a category are identified with the people by definition, any particular campaign must continually work to make this identification its own. In attempting to do so, the Gandhamur campaign faced accusations that mirrored criticism of party politics. The reporter for Kerala TV accused Rahul and others of acting like *goondas*, not as a people's struggle should act. Likewise, local opponents of the campaign also claimed that the Action Council were *goondas* and argued that all of the funding for the campaign was coming from outside the village, often from overseas. And, as discussed in Chapter 2, the company that owned the gelatin factory had argued that the violence by police was instigated by Maoists from outside the village. In each of these challenges to the campaign's authenticity as a people's struggle, an attempt is made to identify the Action Council with some group that is definitively

opposed to the people. In line with Ranciere's analysis, this is done by arguing that campaign participants are motivated not by the wrongs of the factory, but by some more particular interest, usually greed or vengeance.

The notion that people's struggles do not represent any particular interest group—that they have the empty, unmarked subjectivity of the people as a whole—is, of course, what draws Sunny, Adarsh, and other *Kēraḷīyam* associates to work in solidarity with these campaigns. As noted in Chapter 1, Kerala's alternative leftist tradition has long turned to "people's politics" as a recourse from the party politics that dominates the state. For activists who define themselves not primarily by a particular ideology but, on the contrary, by a rejection of ideological dogmatism and the interests of organized groups, "the people" is arguably the only collective broad and empty enough to undertake positive social change. Thus, as shown in Chapter 3, *Kēraḷīyam* strips campaign participants of their partiality, rendering them only identifiable as those who belong to a place. At its heart, this conception of the people is founded on what I call an immediation ideology; a belief that certain semiotic processes happen without mediation (Mazzarella, 2006). The people respond spontaneously to their direct experience of oppression and rise up to lay claim to justice (for further discussion, see Chapter 7). For this reason, the only work remaining for activists like those associated with *Kēraḷīyam* is that of solidarity.

And yet, inasmuch as an action council was really only ever a small group of particular people, not the people as a whole, solidarity organizers always found themselves working to ensure the immediate and disinterested response to injustice that could identify the part with the whole. In the interventions described in Chapter 3, solidarity organizers take themselves to be doing this work. As described in Chapter 2, it was the failure of the Gandhamur Action Council to adequately cooperate in this process that led some solidarity organizers to abandon the

campaign and question its authenticity as a people's struggle.

With our analysis of politics in the road, we see that the Gandhamur Action Council, though it rejected many of the solidarity organizers' interventions, was still very much concerned to identify with "the people." However, unlike the immediacy and spontaneity of the imagined people, the Action Council was continually engaged in manipulating the multiple mediations required to display its authentic image as people's struggle before the public gaze. Staging the people on the roadbridge meant gathering a crowd and laying dead fish in the sun, it meant courting some journalists and cursing others, it meant shutting off a video camera one day and editing footage the next. At other times, it meant sitting in a tent, breaking a pipe, or even beating factory workers with sticks. But most of all, it meant ensuring that public displays of outrage at injustice must never appear staged. Rather, what was said in the open must always appear to be said openly.

4.5 Talking openly, talking in the open

It is possible to view road politics in Gandhamur as simply another example of failed Indian democracy. Not only is the public sphere not set apart from the "pressure of the street," but the Action Council is apparently using that pressure (and, indeed, whatever pressure it can) to present itself as something it is not. More generally, the approach to publicity outlined by Sujit is arguably an excellent example of the insincere, interested communication liberalism wishes to expunge. Even Sujit acknowledges that this is not how "real gentlemen" talk.

Be that as it may, if the publicity of the road is not the publicity of the public sphere, I would argue that this is not because public life in Gandhamur is unlike public life in Europe, but rather because the disembodied, socially unmarked, and purely disinterested discourse of the imagined public sphere is unlike actual public life anywhere. Indeed, in tracing out the

mechanisms behind the particular uses of roads practiced by the Action Council, I have aimed to suggest that the basic workings of indeterminate addressivity, if not the relevant ideologies, are much the same as elsewhere. My impulse to be careful about how I, or Sunil, talked in the road was not motivated by my appreciation of local practices, but simply by an intuitive sense of how things could go wrong. I would likewise suggest that we should not expect that indeterminate addressivity will spur people to speak openly. Surely, in a world where there are no absolutely anonymous and disconnected spheres of discourse, we would more likely expect people to be careful about what they say in public.

But this is not to say that all public speech is disingenuous speech. Such a conclusion would not do justice to the dilemmas faced by participants in the Gandhamur campaign. The Action Council members believed in their cause. While taking the role of the oppressed people often required careful imagework, this is not to say that their attempts to do so were insincere. My use of theatrical metaphors here is not intended to suggest that they were simply pretending. Indeed, every indication during my years of studying this campaign was that those involved took themselves to be "the people," and self-evidently so. But communicating this to others, paradoxically, required them to at times hide certain things or present things as other than they were.

The best illustration of this tension is surely Vijayan's own approach to the campaign. Counter to Sujit's view of Malayali culture, Vijayan frequently declared to me that, for himself and for the Action Council, everything was said openly (*tuṛannu paṛayuka*). And he performed this openness in various ways as well. The day I arrived in Gandhamur for dissertation fieldwork, shortly after the police violence, there was a demonstration in front of the factory gates. Dozens of police were there, and I knew I was being watched closely. But Vijayan insisted

in putting me on the back of his bike and driving me to his new house. As we went, I asked if he was not concerned this would hurt the campaign's image. But he shrugged this off, saying that people would say what they were going to say. It did not matter what they said, he declared, because everyone knew the truth about the factory's pollution.

And yet, as noted in Chapter 2, Vijayan and other leaders in the campaign did their strategizing behind closed doors. Even in the road, in the midst of an event, they could often be seen to step aside and speak in low voices. I remember one day not long after that first bike ride, when I convinced Vijayan to let me follow him continuously for an entire day. Up to midday, I got to ride behind him as zipped around on his bike and made one phone call after another. Then, without warning, he set me down at the struggle tent and rode away. When he returned, I teased him about ditching me. Not laughing, he told me, "for us, mind and speech are one."³⁵ But in the evening, he tried to slip away again. When I convinced him to let me join him, he made me promise not to write about what we did. It was nothing very scandalous, but it was not meant for public display.

Critiques of Vijayan as precisely not what he claimed to be—of avowing open speech in order to further his ruse—were internal to the politics of the Gandhamur campaign. Such accusations were the main stuff of my interviews with factory workers, but they were also given voice by some members of the Action Council. Solidarity organizers, after the split described in Chapter 2, commonly impugned Vijayan's sincerity, though they always maintained that there was a remainder in the village, the people, who were truly oppressed and would inevitably rise to challenge their oppression, even if the current campaign leadership was corrupt. Even Adarsh,

³⁵ “*nammukk manassum samsāravum onn āṇṇ*”

who never went so far as to accuse Vijayan of deceit, nonetheless often said that his speech was like that of a politician. He knew how to craft words that suited his purposes, saying what sounded grand and leaving other things unsaid.

Our analysis of politics in the road offers insight into the stakes in these concerns about instrumental speech, without taking us down the rabbit hole of accusations and counter-accusations internal to the campaign's struggle to be seen as authentic. In their pursuit of the support of public opinion, the Action Council members were confronted with two imperatives that, although aligned in theory, often came into conflict in practice. The first was the imperative of the cause itself. Campaign participants were absolutely convinced that the gelatin factory's pollution was poisoning them and their children. They had long sought to stop the pollution and, by the time of my dissertation research, were committed to shutting down the factory altogether. The second imperative was that they represent themselves as "the people." They had to represent themselves to the whole community (i.e., the indeterminate public) as the whole community (i.e., as those defined not by caste, class, or organizational affiliation, but only by the harm caused them by the factory). As indicated in the previous section, the latter imperative meant talking openly in the open.

However, as we have seen, the public thoroughfare is not a neutral space where the Action Council displays its oppression before a disinterested and impartial gaze. Rather, it is replete with particular, interested evaluations. The road does not sever the interested relations of everyday life, it only mixes them up with one another. The resulting indeterminate addressivity invites not candor, but careful management. And such management becomes all the more urgent, all the more careful, for Vijayan and the members of the Action Council, who understand themselves to have so much to lose. As Vijayan suggests, the campaign participants are

confident that, if all were fully transparent, there would be question about the justice of their cause. But all is not transparent. The mediations that make up the public are not neutral mediations. Therefore, though everything is done openly in theory, everything is not done openly in actuality.

In short, the imperative of winning this particular people's struggle comes into conflict with the imperative of performing people's struggle authentically. At the same time, however, the former imperative can be taken to justify this contradiction. Conviction about the injustice of the harm done by the factory to the residents of Gandhamur is, at bottom, reason to break pipes, hound journalists away, or even—should it be necessary—to take up wooden sticks of their own. If the Action Council must take such steps to stage "the people," they justify this by the conviction that they are the people. Thus, Vijayan could at once claim that the campaign had no desire but to expose everything and also work, with great fervor, to manage the campaign's exposure. This included working to manage exposure to my own research, which, from the perspective of campaign participants, was a channel to addressees arguably more unknown than any others.

In his challenge to what he considers the inherently oppressive communicative norms of the public sphere, Cody recommends further exploration of "the people" as an embodied alternative to the "unmarked citizen" of liberal democratic theory (Cody, 2015, p. 52). However, as analyzed in the context of road politics in Kerala, the production of the people, though very much embodied, shares with the public sphere theory many of the features of collective self-abstraction that Cody and others find politically objectionable. Like the public sphere, the people is very much an "ideology that allows some people to speak for humanity in general" (Cody, 2015, p. 51). Or, if the concept of humanity seems out of place here, we can say that the staging

of the people in people's struggle substitutes part for whole, particular for universal. Moreover, this misrepresentation is tied to a folk theory about indeterminate addressivity that, though more realistic than that of Habermas, nonetheless grounds the notion that to speak openly in the open is to shed one's concern for social ties. As Laclau (2005) suggests, such a bracketing, if not erasure, of caste, class, or other social particularities appears to be inherent to identification with the people. For the purposes of public appeal, the bodies that make up the people in the road may not be any more socially marked than the rational arguments that make up the citizen in the public sphere.

What we have with the publicity of the thoroughfare, then, is not a coherent alternative program to that of liberalism and its public sphere ideal. Such a radical departure from the liberal imaginary could only be argued, I suspect, according to values that are radically incommensurable with those that inspire that imaginary. Our analysis of road politics in Gandhamur, to the contrary, raises many concerns—the difficulty of speaking openly in the open, the misrepresentation of a part as the whole—that are in line with those that motivate both Habermas' thinking and that of his critics. However, the thoroughfare metaphor, as elaborated in our analysis of people's struggle, treats some of these concerns from a different angle that both complements and corrects for some of the failures of liberal democratic norms. Chief among the corrections is a setting aside of the hope that the public sphere holds out for a segregation of reason from social embeddedness, candor from performance, ethics from politics. Publicity is not enclosure, but exposure, and public rationality must be sorted out in the mix of things.

In this chapter, as in Chapters 2 and 3, I have introduced divergent but complementary approaches to conducting people's struggles, describing each as a pursuit in which ethics and politics were closely intertwined. In both cases, people's struggle provided inspiration and

opportunities for transforming oneself. Thus, Sunny became one who "stands apart and sees differently" and Vijayan became a leader of the people. But people's struggle was also a way of changing others, whether it was focused on promoting a broad framework for understanding and evaluating campaigns and protests or on gaining public support for shutting down a particular factory.

In the next three chapters, I build upon this analysis to explore how the ethical dimensions of the activist ethics associated with people's struggles can contribute to a better understanding of ethics as a part of social life. I focus more closely on particular aspects of contention over ethical evaluation, asking how an evaluative acts carry force that can shape the actions and opinions of selves and their others. I begin, in the next chapter, with an analysis of what might at first seem a small matter—a negative evaluation of cookie eating by one activist. I describe how this evaluation exerts force not only on those who are inclined to accept it but, even moreso, by those who resist. In the mechanisms that make this evaluation of cookies persist, I argue, we can find clues to what makes ethics distinctive as a kind of evaluation.

Chapter 5: Sticky Ethics

5.1 On the Road to Environmental Change

It was late on the morning of the first day of the Dialogue Journey, a fifty-day trek through the foothills of Kerala, India's Western Ghats to raise awareness about environmental degradation. There were about forty of us, stretched out along the side of the road in twos and threes, keeping up steady conversation as we walked. Some of the younger participants stopped to buy snacks at a little shop beside the road. Soon, the twos and threes were drawing together as foil packages of cookies were passed from hand to hand.

"Hey! One second!" Ali called out, coming back from the front of the march. He clapped his hands several times. Everyone stopped and turned toward him. As he made his way to the rear, a ring formed around him, blocking the road. Looking from one person to another, Ali said that the cookie eating needed to stop. He stammered a bit as he spoke, but no one cut in; there was no more chatter, no laughter, no crinkling foil.

"I have seen many people here, even in environmentalist camps, saying all kinds of things about avoiding this kind of food. You've told me yourselves!!!...And yet you, all along this road, you are eating this stuff, eating sweets and walking along like this. All that has got to stop right now!"

"Okay, okay." murmured Nishant, but Ali kept on.

"It's because they see you doing it that the kids are doing it! Now these kids that never used to eat this stuff are starting up! So don't you make these kids bad! Us adults already don't

have good habits anyway; we're hopeless. So it's for the children! What we are doing here is trying to bring the little children along in a certain way. So if this is how we act, how is that right? If we lead them down that road? If you stop all this right now, that will be good."

"Okay, okay, okay, okay," said Nishant, wobbling his head affirmatively as Ali returned to the front of the group.

"There are plenty of cashew apples around," Ali called back over his shoulder, "Go ahead and eat those!"

"Okay, okay."

"They are just children, aren't they?" offered one mother with a small laugh.

"It's not the kids—it's you!" Ali cried, loud enough for all to hear, "It's not right to scold children!"

And with that, the journey began again. The bulk of the group moved ahead and gradually stretched out along the edge of the road. But some hung back for another bite. The remaining packages of cookies drifted toward the very rear of the group.

What had just happened to cookie eating? During fieldwork, Sunil and I were often on alert for moments like these, in which seemingly trivial aspects of social life were suddenly made to matter in new ways. We paid attention partly because this is what the pursuit of environmental justice seemed to be about; activists were perpetually engaged in denying values held by those around them while also asserting the goodness or badness of things, like baked goods, that were not usually evaluated in such ways. This was the explicit mission of the Dialogue Journey—to use techniques of conversation to reorient the values of farmers in Kerala's ecologically fragile rainforests. But Sunil and I also paid attention for a more prosaic reason: we were anxious not to

get caught. The activists' concern with contesting the boundaries between the ethical and the nonethical made it difficult to know what might, in any given interaction, be invested with great moral import. Thus, we watched closely so as to watch our step, struggling to keep abreast of what had become an ethical matter and what was still just a snack.

How do we know ethics when we see it? This is not only a problem for studies of activist ethics. As others have noted, clarifying the boundaries of the moral domain has been a challenge for the anthropology of ethics as well (Cassaniti & Hickman, 2014). In recent years, anthropologists have turned up all sorts of new moral and ethical things—not only values and codes, but moods and emotions, existential breakdowns, experiences, narratives, freedoms, and epochs. "Moral" and "ethical" have become very productive qualifiers, but what is it that makes all of these moral and ethical things deserving of the name? Responding to this problem, some have argued that stricter analytic boundaries must be drawn, so as to prevent ethics from encompassing everything (Beldo, 2014; Shweder & Menon, 2014). Others have argued that such approaches are likely to be overly narrow and have suggested that ethics is there to be found in every social act (Lambek, 2010; Merlan, 2010; Zigon & Throop, 2014). As with environmental activists, so among anthropologists the boundaries of the moral domain are contentious and uncertain.

In the analysis that follows, I examine what happened to cookies on the first day of the Dialogue Journey in order to explore how anthropologists can clarify what we mean by ethics. Not, of course, because cookies are inherently ethical things—for most people in Kerala, most of the time, cookies can be better or worse in terms of taste or healthiness, or as a marker of social status, but they are not taken as good or bad in an ethical way. Rather, what makes the cookie controversy a good ethnographic puzzle is that cookies were not obviously ethical *or* nonethical

at the time. To be sure, I knew that "bakery items" could have negative valences for some Malayali environmentalists, and shortly before Ali's speech, another journeyer had complained aloud about cookie eating. But no one had paid her much attention at the time, and the snacking had carried on. What made Ali's speech notable was the shift it brought about—a slight shift, I felt, in the moral terrain. But then, how could I be sure?

Was Ali's speech a "moralization" of cookie eating (Lempert, 2013) which effectively attributed ethical import to acts that, a kilometer up the road, had not mattered in that way? The difficulty of strictly labeling Ali's speech a moralization is symptomatic of a more general indeterminacy in pinpointing when ethical evaluation is happening. Nonetheless, the cookie controversy suggests one way to partially overcome such indeterminacy: attempts by some to deny or resist Ali's seeming ethical evaluation of cookies actually made the stakes in the cookie controversy more recognizably ethical. I describe this as a stickiness—a tendency of those who disobeyed Ali to evaluate themselves with reference to Ali's evaluation even though they disagreed with that evaluation. Such stickiness of accountability may be one sign that moralization is happening. Moreover, a close analysis of the processes that rendered Ali's evaluation sticky can also bring empirical clarity to key terms in existing proposals for how to define ethics.

5.2 How to Spot a Moral Happening

One of anthropology's long-standing contributions to the study of ethics has been the documentation of diversity in human values. Anthropologists have challenged unifying accounts of ethics in philosophy and psychology by presenting ethnographic examples that defy ethical categories that seem intuitive to Western scholars (e.g., Benedict, 1934; Douglas, 1966; Mauss, 1967; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1985). Indeed, within anthropology, the basic intuition is

arguably that anything can be made a matter of ethical concern. Some have taken this great diversity to be evidence of the arbitrariness of ethical values, while others have continued to insist on moral realism or objectivity. Regardless of their positions with regard to debates about "moral relativism," however, anthropologists have often been at pains to avoid overly narrow definitions of the moral domain. Most often, the refrain has been: "this too is ethics."

Ironically, this insistence on expanding the range of the ethical has been central to recent accusations that the old "Durkheimian" anthropology of morality conflated the moral domain with social life as such. On the one hand, earlier anthropologists have been criticized for following Durkheim in seeing morality in everything, thus allowing it to dissolve out of view (Cassaniti & Hickman, 2014; Laidlaw, 2014b; Robbins, 2007; Zigon, 2008). On the other hand, the basis of this problem has been described as an overly narrow focus on obligations (Laidlaw, 2002, 2014b) and moral codes (Zigon, 2008). Thus, proposals for overcoming the so-called "Durkheimian collapse" (Cassaniti & Hickman, 2014) have sought to scout out new moral territory, paradoxically countering the alleged tendency to see ethics everywhere by uncovering it in an ever wider range of social phenomena.

Unfortunately, major proposals for the new anthropology of ethics appear to reintroduce problems that are analogous to those that they criticize in Durkheim. For example, Laidlaw has proposed a Foucauldian/neo-Aristotelian anthropology of ethics as practices of freedom, which would make self-cultivation (rather than Durkheimian social coercion) central to ethical life. But even though Laidlaw insists that he employs freedom in a culturally-situated way (Laidlaw, 2014a), others have taken issue with his placement of a core Western value at center stage (Keane, 2014; Robbins, 2009). Similarly, while Zigon's anthropology of morality is ostensibly an expansive project, he also makes Heideggerian existential comfort central to his conception of

ethics, describing it as the fundamental aim of all ethical life (Zigon, 2010; Zigon & Throop, 2014). Certainly, both of these approaches have drawn attention to previously neglected aspects of ethics. But by making certain values or concerns fundamental to the very definition of the moral domain, these proposals prematurely constrict our view as well.

Some anthropologists attempt to tackle this problem with definitions that specify the minimal formal features of ethical evaluation while allowing for maximal diversity of values. Thus, Shweder and Menon argue that reference to objective standards is a defining feature of moral judgment that sets it apart from other varieties of evaluation (Beldo, 2014; Shweder et al., 1985; Shweder & Menon, 2014). A distinct but related proposal is that moral values are "goods in their own right," valued without reference to any further value as justification (Keane, 2016). Unlike the proposals above, both of these ways of delimiting ethics are agnostic with respect to the content of ethical principles and the range of concerns that can be related to these principles. One could conceivably take anything to be objectively good/bad, or good/bad in its own right. Moreover, both definitions build on key concepts from Western moral philosophy and are intuitive (if contested) from this point of view; they resonate with what "we" mean when we talk about ethics. In short, these definitions cover the kinds of diversity with which anthropology has been concerned while also distinguishing ethics from other evaluative domains.

Difficulties arise, however, when trying to use these formal definitions to determine whether a particular evaluative act is "ethics." For example, it is difficult to determine whether Ali and others take cookies to be objectively bad or, alternatively, whether they consider cookies "bad in their own right." Part of the problem is that both of these definitions focus on the kinds of reasons invoked by a particular evaluation, leading us to ask, for example, whether Ali justifies his claim in terms of objective standards. But Ali is not very explicit about the reasons that

cookie eating is bad. His talk of wanting to "bring the children along in a certain way" may feel intuitively ethical, but he does not elaborate on why this "certain way" is good. The ambiguity here raises the question of how an analyst knows what reasons are being invoked in an evaluation and whether or not those reasons qualify as ethical. What would we have to hear in Ali's words or see in the reactions of those gathered around to recognize this as an invocation of an objective standard or an absolute good? Of course, one might argue that the ambiguity of Ali's reasons is a problem for our example, not for these definitions. But to limit ethical evaluation to the utterance of reasons having a particular logical form would be a narrow circumscription of ethics indeed; surely, this is not what the proponents of these definitions have in mind.

The analysis presented here takes a related but somewhat different approach, inspired by Michael Lempert's insistence on the centrality of reflexive processes of "moralization" to the ethnographic study of ethics. By tracking processes of moralization, we can take ethics as an object of study without assuming where we will find it or what it will look like. Like the definitions tying ethics to "objective goods" and "goods in their own right," this approach circumscribes ethics formally without privileging particular topics or values as inherently ethical. But here, we are watching for a sort of social process or event, rather than a sort of reason.

What sort of process should we be looking for? One way to approach this question is to take a close look at what seems (if only intuitively) to be an ethicalization and work backwards, asking what it is that makes this seem ethical. Through a close analysis of fieldnotes, audio, and video of interaction before, during, and after Ali's condemnation of cookie eating, I describe the contentious process by which the ethicalization of cookie eating was achieved, resisted, and overcome. I interpret this process in light of two years of ethnographic research among this group of environmental and social activists. The logic of such an account is limited; an analysis

of what makes the cookie controversy seem to be a moral happening cannot produce a claim about what is necessary and sufficient to ethics as such. Indeed, such an account is inherently dependent upon our pre-existing notions of what ethics is all about. Nonetheless, by indicating how key features of the cookie controversy speak to the notions of "objective standards" and "goods in their own right," this analysis helps to clarify what we might mean by "ethical import" and what the attribution of ethical import looks like in interaction.

5.3 Was that Ethics? Authority and Reasons in Evaluation

When we started out on the Dialogue Journey that morning, no one was talking about cookies—in moralizing ways or otherwise. No one seemed very concerned about food at all. We left without breakfast, trying to get a head start in a race against the sun. By around eleven o'clock, it would be too hot to continue on. The plan was to wait to eat until then, and at first this did not seem like such a problem. My body felt lean and light after a brief night's rest on a hard floor. But as we charged up and down the hills, the lightness in my stomach became more of an emptiness. Eleven seemed a long way away.

Coming around one bend, I spotted a dozen of the younger walkers exiting a tea shop. They were mostly teenagers and twenty-somethings, accompanied by Benny (in his thirties, but still a bachelor), and Paulson, who was older. I was handed a piece of *murukku*, then a second, then a few fried chick peas.³⁶

"On this trip, using *beedis*³⁷ or cigarettes or those kinds of things is not allowed, you hear?" Malik said to Rohit, wagging a scolding index finger in his face. Rohit grinned and broke open another packet of chickpeas.

³⁶ *Murukku* is a crunchy fried snack.

³⁷ A *beedi* is a hand-rolled cigarette.

We hurried to catch up with the others, who had gotten far ahead while the young people were shopping. In addition to the chickpeas and peanuts, which people ate immediately, some had also purchased rolls of cookies wrapped in shiny foil. As we rejoined the group, these were broken open and distributed. Soon about half of the group was munching them, and many had a second cookie ready in hand. But as I came up alongside Jenny, I heard her complaining to her neighbor about all of these cookies being passed around.

"What kind of Dialogue Journey is this?" she said, turning to address me and then turning again to those behind me. "We have only just begun and everyone has started eating cookies!"

She raised her voice to complain to those around her. She said that cookies should not be eaten on a journey like this. Not only that, she said, but there are children in the group who do not even eat cookies at home, and now those that have purchased the cookies have gotten these children eating them as well. The people around her listened quietly, but no one said anything in reply. Foil crinkled as one man reached for another cookie. Jenny turned and made her way up toward the front of the group. The offers and acceptances of cookies began again in full force.

"These aren't corporate cookies," said Benny, squinting at the fine print on the back, "These are our own indigenous stuff!"

"Made in India!" a girl affirmed.

"This really ought to be avoided completely, no?" said Manu.

Laughter rippled through the group.

"He says that as he takes a cookie!"

"Avoid it!" commanded Benny.

People pressed their lips to hold back the crumbs as they laughed.

Moments later, however, Ali returned down the same path along which Jenny had

departed, cutting his way quickly back into the middle of the cookie eaters.

"Hey! One second!" he called out, raising a hand in the air.

If Ali's speech was an act of ethicalization, it was certainly not an isolated act.

Considered in light of prior events, it is clear that Ali took up an evaluative position that was prepared for him by others. For example, his statement about the influence of cookie eating on children can now be seen to echo Jenny's complaint that people have given cookies to children who do not eat them at home. In this way, the events leading up to Ali's speech offer clues to understanding what the cookie controversy was about and whether it is well described as a moral happening or not. But the evidence here is not all on one side. On the one hand, utterances by Jenny and others link cookies to broader categories and principles that seem to support the notion that recognizably ethical reasons are in play. On the other hand, if Jenny invoked the same reasons as Ali but without effect, then to what extent is this event really about reasons, categories, or principles at all? Perhaps what is really at stake is Ali's authority in the group. If so, to what extent should we see this event as an ethicalization of cookie eating? The events preceding Ali's speech suggest these two possible interpretations of the impact of his speech and raise questions about the relation between authority and reasons in our conceptualization of ethical evaluation.

The tension between these two interpretations was reinforced by interviews I conducted during subsequent days of the Dialogue Journey. When I asked journey participants what had happened and what it was all about, I received strong but conflicting opinions about whether the controversy had anything to do with ethics. For example, Bashir sharply distinguished Ali's opposition to cookies from the rule against smoking on the trip; the latter was about "values"

(*mūlyaññaḷ*), he said, not like cookies. He said that he really had no idea why Ali had been opposed to cookies, but since Ali was the official "captain" of the march, that was reason enough to do what he said. On the other hand, Nishant—who had responded with "okay, okay" to Ali, but had also been among those to fall back and continue eating—stated quite explicitly that Ali's point was about "morality" (*dhārmikata*),³⁸ whereas he said his own refusal to stop eating cookies was about having missed breakfast. Such discrepancies in interview responses suggest that there was no uniform understanding of what the cookie controversy was all about. At the same time, these responses also indicate that a contrast between deference to authority and acceptance of moral reasons was important to how people interpreted Ali's actions and responded to them.

More generally, a contrast between authority and moral reasoning was central to journey participants' ideals about how activism ought to be done. The Dialogue Journey was premised on the notion that environmental values could and should be promoted through a specific speech genre of "dialogue" (*samvādam*) that was defined by an opposition to authoritative speech (cf. Freire, 1974). In trainings leading up to the journey, organizers explicitly juxtaposed their vision for the event with another awareness-raising trek in the same region twenty-five years before. The Save the Western Ghats Journey, an inaugural event in the early history of Kerala's environmental movement, sought to raise awareness with speeches and poetry readings. In the Dialogue Journey, by contrast, activists would cultivate awareness by listening and asking questions. The motto of the journey became "the ear is our tool, not the mouth." This vision for

³⁸ Nishant's use of this term was somewhat remarkable, in that *dhārmikata* was most often used by environmentalists to talk of religious values (usually negatively), whereas they most often used Bashir's language of "values" (*mūlyaññaḷ*) to speak of their own evaluative positions (see Chapter 1).

change through dialogue presupposed that ethical evaluation could be purified of certain kinds of authoritative influence. The Dialogue Journey aimed to help mountain residents come to see the importance of environmental conservation for themselves.

The contrast between deference to authority and assent to moral reasons is a familiar one in Western thought and resonates with recent concern about the importance of freedom and reflection in ethics (Faubion, 2001; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014b; Zigon, 2008). Within the literature on defining ethics, we can find a related contrast in the argument that ethical evaluation is "objective" (Beldo, 2014; Shweder & Menon, 2014). Elaborating on this notion, Shweder and Menon argue that moral judgements are by definition, "impersonal/impartial," and tie their proposal to Henry Sidgwick's argument that to claim something is morally right is to claim that "it cannot, without error, be disapproved by another mind" (Shweder & Menon, 2014, p. 363, citing Sidgwick 1884, 27-35). In other words, the force of a moral claim is not, in principle, reducible to the authority of the claim maker. While not all subscribe to this view, the stakes in the study of ethics have had to do with giving greater emphasis to human concern with the right and good as opposed to "analyses that emphasize structure, power, and interest" (Lambek, 2010, p. 1). Anthropologists agree that the study of ethics cannot be purified of these other aspects of social life, but the latter terms have nonetheless continued to provide defining points of contrast. In examining a related tension between authority and reasons in the cookie controversy, my aim is not to disentangle ethics from these "others," but to trace their entanglements more precisely.

The force of authority is not hard to see in the cookie controversy: people stopped eating cookies when Ali told them to and not when Jenny did, even though she had also pointed to impacts on children. But where does this difference in authority rest? Ali is older than Jenny, he is a man, and he bore the official title of "captain," as Bashir pointed out. All of these could be

important to why Ali's words were more effective. It is worth noting, however, that Bashir's interview was one of the rare occasions when I heard someone refer to Ali as "captain" without irony. He never used the title himself. Similarly, with regard to age, recall Ali's comment that his words were meant for adults because "it's wrong to scold children," a position that directly contradicts the usual intergenerational hierarchy in Kerala. Just as they resisted speaking authoritatively to those they sought to persuade, environmental activists also conscientiously sought to conduct their relations with one another in ways that resisted many commonplace hierarchies. This does not mean such hierarchies were not operant (just as a vision for ridding dialogue of authority does not mean that such dialogue ever happened on our journey), but it does pose a challenge to any straightforward account of social location in the force of evaluation.

To understand Ali's authority, we might do well to look past the title of captain and ask how he became captain in the first place. Ali was not, technically, one of the organizers of the Dialogue Journey. He was asked by the organizers to act as captain because he was a renowned wildlife photographer and environmental essayist. Ali's role in the trainings leading up to the journey is telling. He took trainees on a walk into the forest. He had us take off our shoes and walk barefoot, the way he does on his own treks. He led us away from the path and had us sit on boulders in a dry stream bed, close our eyes, and listen to the forest. And he explained that because he has the forest, he does not need a church, a mosque, or a temple. In short, Ali was asked to be captain because his relation to the environment, and especially the forest, was an example to other participants. The social location that gave his evaluations force was, at least in part, his position as an exemplar with respect to the environmental values that the Dialogue Journey was meant to enact.

Thus, while deference to authority may be part of the story here, the efficacy of that

authority was grounded in a recognition of values. Such value-based authority should not be seen as strictly separable, however, from other aspects of social location. With regard to intergenerational hierarchies, for example, Ali explicitly described his own leadership in the journey in connection with his age vis-à-vis many other participants. Although many adults participated in the journey, and the lead organizers were middle-aged or older, it was officially promoted as an action by and for youth. Ali told me his motivation in accepting the position of captain was a desire to cultivate the next generation of environmental activists. Indeed, he described this as the *whole* point for him; he never even bothered stopping at houses along the way because, he said, he was more interested in influencing young activists than local residents. But Ali's ability to wield influence was structured by his own ideologies about intergenerational authority ("it is wrong to scold children") and, relatedly, dependent upon the regard in which he was held.

If Ali's authority was rooted in already salient values, might these values be the key to distinguishing what is ethical from what is not? Are there a set of principles or categories that are the ultimate arbiter both of who can assert ethical evaluations authoritatively and of whether cookie eating (or any other particular act or thing) is a viable object of such evaluations? If so, then we might interpret the badness of cookies to be a "moral badness" simply because cookies, or even food generally, are known to belong to a larger category of ethically important things.

Even given the difference between responses to Jenny's and Ali's opposition to cookies, there are signs that, for some, cookies were already associated with a category of things prohibited on the Dialogue Journey. Malik referenced such a category when he warned Rohit about "*beedis* or cigarettes or those kinds of things." Notwithstanding the opinions of Bashir and others I interviewed that *beedis*, cigarettes, and cookies are *not* all of a kind, talk about the toxic

effects of "bakery items," refined sugar, white flour, tea, GMOs, or other comestibles was common in this circle of environmental activists. Moreover, to call these things toxins is not simply to say that they are bad for bodily health. Among the Dialogue Journey participants, some were practitioners of "natural life," *prakṛti jīvitam*, which takes the elimination of unnatural toxins, both in one's own body and in the wider world, as a mechanism for social transformation (see Chapter 6). A connection with natural life could itself be heard as echoing much longer histories of ethical concern with food, most proximally in Gandhi's experiments with diet (Alter, 2000; Gandhi, 1954) and more broadly in the importance given to dietary distinctions in caste hierarchy (Dumont, 1970; Marriott, 1968; Srinivas, 1966). With regard to the latter, most activists were vociferously opposed to "Brahminical" notions of morally superior diet. And yet, one might argue that even when they repudiated dietary casteism, environmentalists reproduced an ethical concern with comestibles, only flipping what counted as good or bad.

Despite all these seeming links with local ethical categories, ambiguities in the cookie controversy complicate this interpretation in two ways. First, even if there are echoes of Brahminism, Gandhianism, and natural life here, it is far from clear that this is what the cookie controversy is primarily about. There is no obvious connection between these themes and Jenny or Ali's arguments. As indicated by later interviews, this ambiguity was not mine alone. The conflicting interpretations I received from Bashir, Nishant, and others suggest that there may have been no uniform understanding of what had been at stake in the cookie controversy. And this points to a second, more basic problem: if the reason not to eat cookies was not simply a matter of taste or health, but has to do instead with caste status, or purity, or projects of social transformation, what is it that makes these ethical reasons? Thus, a turn to locally-defined ethical reasons, categories, or topics brings us back to the question with which we began: how do we

know ethics when we see it?

But this does not mean that we are right back where we started. For one thing, we have established that even if authority is important in evaluation (as it clearly is here), this need not indicate either that a particular evaluation is not ethics, nor that ethical evaluation can be adequately described in terms of "structure, power, and interest" (Lambek, 2010, p. 1).

Additionally, while we could not tie cookies to any stable local category of ethics, conflicting construals of the cookie controversy demonstrate that the participants in the Dialogue Journey did construct such categories and make such distinctions. For example, Bashir may not have thought that cookies had anything to do with values, but he made this point by contrasting cookies with cigarettes, which he said were definitely about values. The boundaries of ethics may have been contentious, but people did draw boundaries.

The interview responses produced another insight as well. In analyzing transcripts, I found that it was often impossible to pull apart whether someone was talking about what they thought *had* happened, or what they thought *should* have happened. For example, reviewing Bashir's words closely, it was ambiguous whether he was saying that Ali had not attributed values to cookies, or whether he was simply saying that he himself does not think cookies are about values. Similarly, some interview respondents said that Ali had not made a moral claim because Ali, who is not known as a proponent of natural life, would not have said something like that. Again, these could be heard as opinions about what Ali should have said. Opinions about whether cookies had been ethicalized shaded into new assertions of the presence or lack of ethical import in cookie eating. Descriptions of what had happened were also continuations of the controversy.

This points to a different approach to analyzing when ethicalization is happening. On the

one hand, the "about" of Ali's speech is fundamentally indeterminate because each new construal of the initial evaluation of cookies also had some limited power to reframe that evaluation as an ethicalization or not. On the other hand, this very process of reframing offers new opportunities for exploring what ethicalization looks like. Rather than asking about the authority of the person doing the evaluating, the values invoked, or the reasons given, we may do better to examine the effects an evaluation has on further interaction. In order to understand whether Ali's speech was an ethicalization, and what might make it recognizably so, we may have better luck exploring what happened afterward than what happened beforehand.

5.4 Sticky Ethics

In one sense, the efficacy of Ali's demand to stop eating cookies was extremely limited. Only moments after he turned his back, the crackling of foil could be heard again. To be sure, most of the group turned and followed him. But a small contingent of five or six hung back a bit, drifting to the rear and letting a gap open up between themselves and the rest of the group. When the others were at a safe distance, they began to share the cookies again, joking with each other about the scolding they had received. I was shooting video, while my research assistant Sunil was taking notes.

"Open it! Open it!" said Nishant, "After this we won't want to buy any more."

Laughter.

"Let's just finish eating all of this," Raman agreed, "That's all I can say."

"Hey look!" said Benny, pointing at Sunil, "He's writing names! He's writing down the names of everyone who is eating cookies!"

Lots more laughter.

"He's writing the names of everyone who's eating cookies!" repeated Ajeesh.

"Heh-heh!" Sunil replied, "And then I'm going to hand it over up there!"

Ajeesh handed Sunil a biscuit.

"Thank you."

"From now on, only write your own name!"

Thus, the cookie eating carried on, but not quite in the same way as it had before. There was a new zest in the sharing of cookies now, a new enthusiasm. Now the cookies were eaten with loud praise of their taste and complaints of dire hunger. The jokes were new too; they all played on the prohibition of cookie eating and the fear of being caught. Mock fear, perhaps...but then, why was everyone keeping so far behind?

"Better if you go slowly!" said Benny to Paulson, who had just come up from behind with a packet of cookies under his arm. Benny handed him a cookie from his own pack, and pointed his thumb up the road, "As far as cookie eating goes, it's all swearing and yelling around here!"

But Paulson appeared unconcerned. He was a generation older than Benny—older than Jenny and probably Ali as well. Already, in the few hours we had been walking, he had positioned himself as a bit of a maverick, stopping to visit nearly every house along the way while the others hurried on. Now, he laughed and opened up his own cookie package. He loudly invited the others to have some, and ignored their pleas to be quieter about it. Soon, he was at the center of the small group, handing out cookies as he walked.

"These are arrowroot cookies," said Benny, "So it's okay. They aren't any of that corporate stuff."

"So we can eat them, eh?" said someone else.

More laughter.

"Hey! Hey!" said Benny over the laughter, "This approach, all of this promoting corporations, it is not right!"

"Just eat them up, buddy!" replied Ajeesh, "Eat them up!"

"Just for that, we're not giving any more to Benny!" said Raman.

"However you like, eat them up!" said Benny, "When your stomach is totally empty, there are no corporations! No schmorporations either! Heh, heh!"

At first blush, the continued cookie eating by this small group might seem to indicate that the force of Ali's words was felt more as a practical problem than an ethical one. Those who hung back and ate deferred to Ali's authority within the group, but they also disagreed with his evaluation of cookies. Perhaps Ali had not persuaded them to stop eating, but only that they would do best to stop eating in his sight. According to this interpretation, it might seem that the impact of Ali's evaluation of cookies is wholly reducible to his own authority in the group; once they are out of Ali's group, the cookie eaters are also beyond the reach of his words.

And yet, in their jokes, in their keeping quiet and hanging back, and in their talk about hunger and corporations, one can hear another impact of Ali's words. Ali's speech did not stop these few from eating, but it did change the way they ate. Even if they had split away from the larger group spatially, the cookie eaters' words and gestures were constantly positioning them in relation to that group. They were not merely "out of Ali's group" since maintaining a distance, by walking slowly and talking quietly, was a constant point of concern. Likewise, their jokes and invocations of hunger marked the separation between themselves and the others, especially Ali. In these ways, the cookie eaters linked themselves back to the rest of the group, reproducing the disapproval of their actions in the performance of distancing.

There were two key ways in which the cookie eaters' discourse recalled Ali's words. First, the jokes and mimicry figured Ali's speech as a command to which they could be held accountable. Consider, for example, the jokes about Sunil writing all of their names in his book. Now, all of those present were aware that Sunil and I were conducting research, and even if they had only little understanding of our fieldwork methods, it was unlikely that they seriously thought Sunil was making a list of culprits. Nonetheless, the joke implied (even if only ironically) that cookie eaters *could* be held to account. Likewise, Benny's warning to Paulson to slow down, or the others' pleas to speak quietly—these all implied that Ali had drawn a line that was not to be crossed. The mechanism for the enforcement of this prohibition was unclear, other than Benny's warning about swearing and yelling, but the reluctance to walk with the larger group anticipated *some* enforcement.

The second way Ali's words were recalled clarifies the sort of prohibition we are dealing with. With their talk of just finishing up the last cookies, being driven by hunger, and not eating "corporate stuff," the cookie eaters variously justified their eating to themselves. Pragmatically, justifications are often responses—they are second-pair parts of what conversation analysts call adjacency pairs, in which one turn at talk provokes the next (Keane, 2016; Sidnell, 2010). Accusations provoke justifications, and justifications recall the accusations that provoke them. Thus, in the ways that the cookie eaters justified their actions, we can perceive a sort of mirror-image of the ways in which they took themselves to be accused. The image is clearest in Benny's multiple references to corporations, especially his statement that "promoting corporations is not right," which was closely followed by his equally blunt statement that "there are no corporations" when one's stomach is empty. In these two seemingly conflicting statements, he reproduced the accusation-justification pair whole, evoking the prohibition of cookie eating as a matter of

opposition to corporations. Less explicitly, we might see in Nishant's assurance that "we won't want to buy any more," the implication that at issue was the buying of cookies more than the eating. Or, from the appeals to hunger, we might infer that whatever the problem with cookie eating, it was taken to be reasonably excused by the need for sustenance.

A quick glance at the transcript above reveals that Ali never mentioned corporations, nor hunger, nor did he say anything to distinguish buying from eating. However, the point here is not that the cookie eaters' justifications tell us anything about what accusations Ali actually made, but that they reveal how the cookie eaters took themselves to be accused. And the most crucial thing, for our purposes, is not to ascertain precisely the terms of these imagined, mirror-image accusations. Rather, the crucial point is simply that the cookie eaters took their actions to need justification at all.

Why did they justify their cookie eating? As noted above, accusations provoke justifications, but here all apparent accusers—not only Ali and Jenny, but all those who seemed to have assented to the prohibition of cookie eating—were no longer present to hear the reply. Instead, the cookie eaters justified themselves to one another. In doing so, they not only recalled the accusation, as suggested above, but also implied that they themselves accepted the force of the accusation; they accepted that a justification was needed. One might say that they internalized the accusation. This is not a statement about their psychology. Instead, we can perceive how the accusation had become internal to their interaction, to their dialogue with one another, if not to their inner dialogue.

The cookie eaters did not assent to Ali's evaluation in the same sense as those who followed Ali apparently did. They made clear that they believed their actions were justifiable. And yet, in the collaborative accomplishment of this justification, they also implicitly admitted

that cookie eating is the sort of thing that requires justification. Even when all enforcement of Ali's demand to stop eating cookies seemed to be in abeyance, the evaluative import of that injunction persisted. The cookie eaters projected Ali's speech as a counterforce—something that they disobeyed with their eating, undermined with their joking, and refuted with their justifications. But all of these ways of undoing the badness of cookies also revealed that there was something there to be undone. Something that stuck. And this stickiness made the ethicalization of cookies more apparent.

To see what I mean, it will help to compare two short interactions, one that occurred only shortly after the vignette above and another that happened ten or fifteen minutes later. In the first interaction, a young woman was doling out cookies to those around her. Among them was Salman, Jenny's preteen son, who hung back with the cookie eaters but did not partake.

"Salman, [have a] cookie," she said, reaching the package out toward him.

"I don't want any."

"Huh? Come on, have a cookie." She said, reaching the cookies a bit closer to his face.

"I don't like them."

The others laughed and joined in urging him to take the cookie.

"Come on, take a cookie," Benny said, "Your mom will not even know about it. She is not going to say anything."

More laughter.

"It's not my mother!" retorted Salman, "I just don't like that kind. That's all."

Here, Benny's comment once again projected a prohibition of cookie eating into the interaction, interpreting Salman's refusal of the cookie offer as motivated by fear of being held accountable to that prohibition. The laughter and insistence of the others, moreover, singled

Salman out as deviant for not eating.

Compare this to a brief exchange ten or fifteen minutes later. At that point, the cookies had been finished, and those who had fallen back to eat them together had split up. I found myself walking near Salman, who was alone, when Nazriya—who, like Paulson had been absent for the entire cookie controversy thus far—caught up with us from behind. The torn top of a cookie package glittered from her hip pocket. As she came up beside Salman, she pulled it out and put one in her mouth.

"Want any cookies?" She asked Salman, who was walking beside her. Besides myself, no one else was close enough to hear.

"What kind are they?"

She held the package out to him with the label toward his face.

"No, I don't want any. I don't like that kind."

Nazriya took another cookie herself, and we walked on.

This second interaction very likely would not have caught my attention if it had not been for all of the earlier cookie talk. As it was, however, I was watching closely for any signs of evaluation or judgement—anything that recalled the prohibition of cookie eating, as Benny had in his comment to Salman above. But I could not perceive even the slightest sign that any such judgement had taken place. This does not mean, of course, that neither Nazriya nor Salman were evaluating one another mentally; given Salman's earlier conversation with the cookie eaters, we have good reason to think that he, at least, anticipated some evaluation when he turned down Nazriya's offer. Perhaps his quickness to specify, "I don't like that kind," echoing his words to Benny earlier, was meant to preempt such an evaluation. But other than this, I caught no perceptible sign, in speech or gesture, that tied Nazriya's cookies to Ali's prohibition of cookie

eating or any of the ensuing evaluative position-taking. And since Salman and Nazriya must also rely on perceptible signs for any evaluating to transpire between them, I can well suppose that such evaluative positions were not part of this interaction. Eating cookies simply did not matter in that way.

The contrast between these two cookie-sharing interactions brings ethicalization into relief. In both cases, cookie eating was an ongoing activity, but in the first case it mattered in a way that it did not in the second. To me, at least, it seemed to matter in an ethical way. Even though in the first case cookie eating was encouraged, the very act of encouraging Salman to eat reiterated the prohibition it purported to flout. Indeed, a sort of reversal occurred, in which Salman ended up justifying himself to the others for *not* eating cookies. In the other interaction, by contrast, it seems awkward to even speak of flouting anything, since cookie eating was never considered in light of any prohibition. In the second interaction cookie eating was nonethical in a sense that—despite open and enthusiastic enjoyment of cookies—was never true for the cookie eaters who split off from the larger group.

Those who split off never achieved such nonethical snacking. None of their jokes, their displays of enjoyment, nor their justifications would allow them to eat cookies in the manner of Salman and Nazriya, in which cookie eating did not require any justification. Rather, as suggested above, their efforts to undo Ali's ethicalization of cookie eating actually made this ethicalization more perceptible and certain. In trying to remove cookie eating from ethical evaluation, they confirmed that cookies had been made objects of such evaluation, at least for the time being. They also revealed just how persistent such evaluation can be. We will consider the reasons for this persistence below. For now, the point is that efforts to undo ethicalization, and the stickiness that resists such efforts, are helpful indicators of where ethical evaluation is taking

place. In other words, they are part of the answer to the question of how we can know ethics when we see it.

5.5 What Makes Ethicalizations Persist?

One way to recognize ethicalization is by its peculiar stickiness—its tendency to persist in further interaction despite attempts to deny or resist a particular ethical evaluation. We can see similar examples of sticky ethical value in ethnographic accounts of moral transgression, such as London sex workers' attempts to resist "whore stigma" (Day, 2010), or in accounts of moral transformation, such as the struggle of the Urapmin to put aside ethical demands that conflict with their recently adopted Christian worldview (Robbins, 2004). In these cases, as in the cookie controversy, ethical import seems to confound resistance. Indeed, ethical import may be made more obvious by such resistance because—as we have seen in the case of the soft-speaking, slow-walking cookie eaters—stickiness is most apparent among those who struggle to get unstuck. The wriggling fly reveals the strength of the web.

But what is this stickiness? In the cookie controversy, what persisted was accountability. Following Ali's speech, cookie eating was treated as an act to which one could be held to account. Building on Butler's (2005) work, Keane describes account giving as an act of ethical self-awareness most often brought about by the demand of an authority (2016, pp. 77-79). As he notes, however, ethics is not limited to such explicit, self-aware acts. Likewise, here the stickiness of accountability was perpetuated via semiotic processes that were neither fully explicit nor dependent upon the psychological states of those involved.

To understand how accountability was made sticky, it will help to look again at the contrast between Jenny's original complaints about cookie eating and Ali's speech shortly thereafter. In initiating his scolding, Ali clapped his hands first and called out "Hey! One

second." The group, which had been strung out along the edge of the road, gathered to form a circle around him. Jenny, by contrast, spoke as she walked, turning to address those nearby without stopping them and gathering them together. The key difference here is not between Jenny and Ali's gesture and bodily positioning, but between the resulting orientations of attention in the group. Ali gathered the attention of the group, assuring that everyone heard and that everyone could see that everyone else was listening. In this way, Ali and those present co-constructed a framework in which everyone was held accountable to Ali's evaluation in a way that was never true of Jenny's. Ali's evaluation was publicly ratified, constituting those who attended as accountable to the evaluation of cookies.³⁹

Although Ali gathered attention before he spoke about cookies, public ratification was not so much a precondition for ethicalization as a key aspect of how it was accomplished. The enrollment of those accountable to Ali's evaluation unfolded through an extended interplay of assertions and reactions. The formation of a circle, the silence while Ali spoke, Nishant's nodding and okaying—all of this constituted an attentional community of those whom Ali addressed and who conceded to be evaluated. Likewise, the care the cookie eaters took to maintain a distance from the rest of the group marked them as transgressors. Thus, even though their own evaluative utterances seemed to set them apart as a kind of counter-public, the cookie eaters were still internal to the public of Ali's scolding. Insofar as they hid their opposition to Ali's evaluation of cookie eating from the others, they affirmed that they could be held to account.

³⁹ Warner (2002, p. 61) notes that, "Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members." My usage follows such Habermasian conceptualizations of publics (Cody, 2011b) in this key respect, but differs in that bodily positioning and other nonlinguistic signs are clearly important here while stranger sociality is not.

This connection between concealment and the stickiness of accountability can be seen in other contexts as well. The organizers of the Dialogue Journey, for example, had forbidden smoking. But many participants, including some of the organizers, were regular smokers. During the journey, they could often be found smoking around the corner of a house, behind a tree, or just outside a gate—always out of view. It was not that people did not know they were smoking; rather, keeping smoking out of view was a way of marking it as "unattended." We might think of this as the opposite of Ali's clapping. Heywood (2015) describes a similar situation in his account of Italian "double morality," a concept that condones transgressions of the Catholic moral code so long as those transgressions are "properly hidden." The notion of public ratification helps us to see why the Catholic Church is willing to look the other way. The withdrawal of transgression from public view can have the same ratifying force as explicit affirmation of an evaluation (cf. Warner, 1999). People might not obey the code, but the code sticks.

Reactions to an evaluation can contribute to public ratification regardless of whether those reactions are motivated by reasoning, deference to authority, or even by accident or neglect. For example, given his later actions, we might suspect that Nishant's okaying was insincere; he may never have agreed with Ali. Yet, in public view, he conceded. Likewise, the cookie eaters may have fallen back in order to avoid the disapproval of others (e.g., out of shame) or in order to blunt inner disapproval, or guilt. As noted above, the ways they justified themselves made the prohibition on cookie eating internal to their interaction, but that does not necessarily mean that it had a particular psychological effect. For our purposes, the effects that matter—the effects described above as stickiness—are the material signs by which accountability was made perceptible. Public ratification operated at this level regardless of how it

was felt by those involved.

The disconnect between public ratification and reasons points to what taking something as "good in its own right" might look like in interaction. The fact of ratification makes further questions about the reasons for an evaluation beside the point. To say that everyone assented to be accountable to the injunction against cookie eating is also to say that no one required further reasons for this injunction. Not that no further reasons could be stated, but, for the time being, no one asked for them. Cookie eating was accepted to be bad in its own right.

A second mechanism contributing to stickiness, by contrast, brought reasons back into the picture. The cookie eaters did not just hide their transgressive acts; they justified their transgression to each other while they were hiding. In doing so, the cookie eaters showed that giving adequate reasons for cookie eating was important even when they were not at risk of social sanction by Ali or others. The cookie eaters were trying to "get away" with cookie eating, but they also cared about getting away with it for the right reasons. As such, they gave the cookie controversy new stakes. If the ethicalization of cookie eating was initially a matter of accountability to Ali, it was now a matter of accountability to reasons.

Note that what was perpetuated by the cookie eaters' justifying was not the badness of cookies, but merely that eating cookies required justification. When they teased Salman for not partaking, they seemed to have succeeded in making bad into good and good into bad, but they still played the moral game. This is different from what Robbins (2004) describes among the Urapmin, whose Christian conversion made old taboos sinful, but who still felt the need to justify themselves to the deities who had established these taboos. The badness of taboo acts, even when denied, still stuck. The stickiness of cookie eating is more like what Day (2010) describes among UK sex workers who, in seeking to justify their occupation, employed the same

ethical distinctions between love and money that had been used to condemn them. Such justifying moves may succeed in challenging dominant evaluative positions while still perpetuating the notion that sex, or eating cookies, are fundamentally ethical acts.

The justifying utterances of the cookie eaters offer a new perspective on the notion of ethical values as "objective." Those who shirked Ali's demand construed cookie eating as objectively important in the sense that it required an account even when Ali was not around. We have no recourse here to an explicit local theory of objective value of the sort Shweder and Menon claim is widespread. But by making justification internal to their dialogue with one another, the cookie eaters implicitly attributed the goodness or badness of cookies to a logical relationship between reasons, rather than a relationship between people. Reasons were taken to have an authority of their own.

Taking public ratification and justification together, we have a description of stickiness that incorporates much of what notions of "goods in their own right" and "objective values" convey. Despite ambiguity of reasons, public ratification rendered cookie eating bad for the participants of the Dialogue Journey. At the same time, the justifying utterances of the cookie eaters rendered the moral import of cookies "objective," in the sense that they took themselves to be accountable to the authority of reasons and not only to the authority of persons. Ali's evaluation of cookie eating was not taken to need justification, but it did demand justification from those who ate. This made the cookie controversy seem important in a specifically ethical way.

5.6 A Barbed Affordance

Two weeks later, some of the younger participants in the Dialogue Journey stopped to rest in the shade of a large bodhi tree. Milo, about fifteen but tall for his age, came across the

road with a yellow package of cookies gleaming in his hands. He tore open the package and asked if anyone wanted any. Immediately, he was pounced upon from all sides, small hands reaching up on skinny arms to accept the next cookie in the roll.

"Hey! We should not be eating cookies!"

This was Benny, once again one of the oldest in the group. He wagged a scolding finger high over his head.

"That's a corporate thing!" he said, "In there is white flour, sugar..."

And he began counting off all of the bad ingredients on his fingers. For a moment, things seemed uncertain. The childrens' hands still reached, vying for position, but many of their faces were turned toward Benny.

"You shut up!" shouted Fathima, who was only a little younger than Benny, and she cocked her arm to smack him as she took the next cookie from Milo's hand. Benny launched into a rant about how the cookies were going to rot all of their stomachs, but Fathima would have none of it.

"Don't give any to Benny!" she cried. Benny, still scolding, made a grab for the cookies, and Fathima threw herself in his way. A short scuffle ensued, and much laughter. At last, Benny got his cookie. He whisked it through the air and snorted on it with one nostril, as if performing magic over it.

"That will remove all the badness in the cookie!" he cried and, still laughing, popped it in his mouth.

Had Benny at last removed the badness of the cookie? Perhaps. Certainly Benny's invocation of the cookie prohibition had a different tone, and very different effects, than Ali's

earlier scolding, or even the jokes made among the cookie eaters just after that scolding. What is most interesting, however, is that it was Benny who repeated the prohibition, even in mimicry. For Benny, the prohibition was still publicly present—still available to be troped on. His warning about rotting stomachs even echoed some of the phrasing Jenny had used. But it was not clear that anyone but Benny caught this interdiscursive link. Many of those beneath the bodhi tree had not been present on that first day. Among those who had been there, no one else indicated any recognition of a connection between the two events. The public life of the ethicalization of cookies seemed to have withered away. But the incident still seemed to stick with the one person who had always been most keen to resist it.

There is nothing deterministic about this stickiness. Even the recognition of Ali's concerns as ethical was contingent upon uptake thereafter. Nonetheless, the ethicalization of cookies, once set in motion, took on a kind of force of its own—not a *sui generis* force, but a momentum sustained by the demand to account for oneself. As an affordance, one might think of the ethicalization of cookies as barbed—though never determining uptake, it had a way of catching hold and continuing to be consequential in further interaction. Like a porcupine quill, the more one worried it, the further it worked its way in.

In this sense, what we have called stickiness could also be seen as an expansive tendency. While I have used the term "public" to describe a set of people taken to be accountable to an evaluation, some philosophers have argued that properly ethical claims hold not just for some people or some situations, but for anyone at any time (Kant, 1998; cf. Williams, 1985). Habermas (1989) uses the term public to describe a social group that is potentially unbounded, or universal, even if always limited in actuality. In our analysis, the public reach of the ethicalization of cookies was limited in the first instance to those addressed by Ali and,

thereafter, to those who positioned themselves as requiring justification for their cookie eating. Nonetheless, the ethicalization could be extended and, as we have seen, once extended had a tendency to persist. Thus, a potential universality might be found not so much in the *a priori* applicability of an evaluation to all possible actors, but in the openness of extension to new actors and the difficulty of retracting an ethicalization once it gets its hooks in.

Describing ethics in terms of freedom or unfreedom would miss important aspects of how the sticky force of ethicalization works. After all, eating or not eating cookies might be seen as an exercise of freedom in the case of Ali, who condemned; Bashir who obeyed; Johnson, who shirked unabashedly; or even Benny, who shirked in hiding. But as suggested by the metaphor of stickiness, the ethicalization of cookie eating is also a story about unfreedom because it demonstrates the limits we have in choosing our values even when we choose our actions. For my research assistant Sunil and I, such unfreedom was often palpable in our interactions with environmental activists, many of whom described their work for moral transformation as an exercise of freedom. More often than not, Sunil and I were the shirkers. All along the Dialogue journey, we looked for opportunities to slip away for a cold soda or dine in an AC restaurant. And even when we were not spotted and were firm in our convictions that a soda was not a bad thing, we felt that we were never really free. Regardless of the freedom of our choices, the terms of accountability were not our own.

Stickiness offers one approach to the problem of how anthropologists can know ethics when they see it. Tracking processes of public ratification and justification can help us to identify how certain evaluations define the terms of accountability while others do not. "Stickiness" of accountability is not a defining feature of a new analytic, on par with "objectivity" or "goods in their own right." Rather, stickiness is one way in which these existing notions of what is specific

to ethics can be recognized in social interaction. Watching for stickiness can aid anthropologists in tracing ethicalization and de-ethicalization as contentious, open-ended processes. It can also help us to better describe how ethical evaluations can be compelling even when those involved would seem to prefer otherwise.

In this chapter, I have zeroed in on one moment of evaluation and traced its consequences in order to minutely explore what gives force to ethical evaluation. In the next chapter, I examine how evaluative force shapes the social relations of activists who seek to wield it in pursuit of social change. As I have described earlier, for activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, adopting and enacting radically "alternative" ethical positions on aspects of everyday life is understood to be a primary mechanism for making social change. We have already explored some of the consequences of this scaling of activism, which renders every campaign an equivalent instance of "people's struggle" (Chapters 2 and 3), every relationship an opportunity to challenge social hierarchy (Chapter 3), and every trip to the vegetable shop (Chapter 1) or snack shop (this chapter) a moment of moral choice. In the coming chapter, we will examine the effects of such activism on the lives of individual activists and explore the resulting dilemma, which I argue is fundamental to what it means to be an activist. At the same time, by highlighting tensions between ethical positioning and other aspects of social relations, this chapter helps to describe the place of ethics within social life.

Chapter 6: Consistency and Compromise

6.1 Out of Place

One Sunday night in December, Sunny invited Adarsh, Faiza, and me out for a movie. I say "invited," but when Adarsh finally arrived, looking haggard and grim, he told me that he had not really been given any choice. As usual, that month's *Kēraḷīyam* magazine was way behind schedule and Adarsh, the magazine's assistant editor and only paid staff member, had wanted to work through the night. But Sunny was managing editor, and tonight he had insisted that we all go out. After a heavy dinner of chicken curry and buttermilk, we walked to a nearby theater.

As soon as we came into the lobby, a strange smile lit up Adarsh's face. The fatigue around his eyes was replaced by an eager curiosity. He walked up and down, gazing around as if he had entered a new world. Watching the people crowding in for the next show—mostly teenagers in jeans and t-shirts—he told me that, here, it was as if he too was an anthropologist.

"It's really a whole different culture," he said.

This was his first visit to a "cinema complex," Adarsh told me; otherwise he had only been to " *sādhāraṇa* theaters." To be honest, I am not entirely sure how this theater was all that different from the one in our town, which Adarsh and Faiza went to regularly; that was smaller and older, but it also had air conditioning for at least one of its two screens. But this term, *sādhāraṇa*, "common" or "ordinary," stuck out for me because Adarsh and other environmental organizers often use a related term to distinguish themselves, *pravarttakar* ("activists," see

Chapter 1), from the common people, or *sādhāraṇakkār*.⁴⁰ Indeed, here again, Adarsh was making such a distinction, marking his difference from the others in the theater lobby, but this time *sadharana* was on his side of the fence. Or was it? Because he had only been to ordinary theaters, Adarsh seemed to be saying, he was not ordinary here; he was out of place.

Adarsh roamed around the lobby with his little daughter in his arms. He held her up to touch the ornaments on a huge plastic Christmas tree, and they took turns batting at the inflatable Santa that stood beside it. He seemed to be having fun. But he also said he was uncomfortable—that it was too cold—and after a little while he began holding his handkerchief over his mouth. He looked over at the large snack counter, with its huge glass case and neon lights, and asked aloud whether they might have tea there.

"No, they only have these corporate drinks, like Coca-Cola and Pepsi," said Sunny's wife Maya, "It's very bad."

Living with Faiza and Adarsh, I was often aware of the many ways they found themselves out of place. In some sense, this was simply a part of what they were up to as organizers (*pravarttakar*); they set out to be different from those around them, changing themselves as one way of changing their world. It was not simply class or social background that made Adarsh a stranger at the movie theater. He was not simply uncomfortable because he had

⁴⁰ The term *sādhāraṇakkār* was used by *pravarttakar* in two ways, both of which marked a contrast between these two terms. On the one hand, *sādhāraṇakkār* was used interchangeably with *janāññal*, the "people," who were understood to be oppressed by corporations and the state, and on whose behalf these *pravarttakar* took themselves to be working. On the other hand, *sādhāraṇakkār* was also used to mean specifically the middle classes, who lived the kind of "ordinary" life that these *pravarttakar* saw as perpetuating social inequality and environmental destruction. Note that the contrast between these two meanings of *sādhāraṇakkār* mirrors the tension described in this chapter between working among others and setting oneself apart.

never been in air conditioning. He and Faiza avoided these kinds of places because they did not like them, and they did not like them because they were against air conditioning, against giant huge concrete theaters and malls, and against "corporate drinks." They and other environmental organizers I studied often avoid air-conditioned spaces, just as they avoid using Western medicine, eating white sugar, or building lavish houses. As we will see below, some avoid not only Pepsi and Coca-Cola, but even tea, regarding it also as too corporate to drink. All of these practices set organizers apart from those around them, making them out of place in many of the settings of everyday life. And from this standpoint, it may seem that those comfortable in these settings, the *sādhāraṇakkār*, have a whole different culture.

Or do they? The alterity Adarsh experiences in the theater lobby is certainly not the product of an encounter with an entirely unknown social world, the sort of encounter that was once taken to be the starting point for anthropological research. Adarsh is different from those in the theater lobby not because he has never been to such a place before, but because of the ways that he has distinguished himself from these sorts of people by, for example, avoiding places like this. One might say that Adarsh is out of place not because he is from another place, but because of the ways he enacts his opposition to this place. Below, I will return to the question of how the act of evaluating some object (e.g., opposing a theater or a corporate drink) can have consequences for one's "placement" with respect to others, a problem that has been described by language researchers as alignment or disalignment of evaluative stance (DuBois 2007). For the moment, however, it is enough to observe that, for Adarsh and other environmental organizers, opposition to such things as theaters, air conditioning, or Pepsi is often experienced as far more than a mere difference of opinion; it may be taken as the foundation for the bounding of social worlds.

The explicit, principled positions that Adarsh and other organizers adopt on relatively ordinary aspects of everyday life draw attention to how the ways one "places oneself" ethically may come into conflict with other ways of relating. Often, these are activities or aspects of life that most Malayalis do not take to matter in ethical ways at all; they may be part of the background to ethical considerations, but are not of any concern in and of themselves. But for those who desire major social transformation, the very ubiquity of some practice or thing may make it an apt target for strong opposition, a lever by which to unsettle ordinary life at its very roots. Thus, the "different culture" of organizers like Adarsh can make them not only out of place, but also chronically at odds with those around them. This is a problem for organizers working on projects of social change because it can distance them from the very people they hope to organize. In short, the uncommon positions environmental organizers take on common aspects of their social worlds can make it difficult for them to live in common with others. They become out of place in the very worlds in which they hope to be effective agents.

This chapter argues that organizers, in attempting to change common things, encounter conflicts between setting themselves apart and sustaining relations to common people. On the one hand, they seek to make themselves different from those around them. On the other, they cannot change others if they cut themselves off from them entirely. I compare stories from the lives of two environmental organizers who approach this tension differently: Adarsh, who tends to compromise, and Hari, who tends to stand fast. In the first section, I analyze the logic by which Hari and Adarsh come to take tea drinking—one of the most common accompaniments of face-to-face interaction in Kerala—to be ethically unacceptable. I then explore why such opposition to ordinary things produces a dilemma between amiable relations with others and consistency with oneself. In the second section, I describe Hari's and Adarsh's contrasting

responses to this dilemma. Hari's cosmological approach attempts to reorganize the world to maximize consistency with his values, whereas Adarsh's approach compromises consistency in favor of sustaining relations with others. Ultimately, both organizers are forced to give something up in the process—either lose friends and kin, or live inconsistently.

6.2 VapoRub to Tea: Radical Living and the Ethical Evaluation of Ordinary Things

It was, I expected, my last chance to interview Adarsh. We had lived together for over a year and had talked daily about *Kēraḷīyam* magazine, where he was editor, about the ongoing protest against the gelatin factory in Gandhamur, about the history of the concept of "people's struggle"—about all of the things my imagined dissertation was supposed to be about. And yet, perhaps because we talked so much of those things, there were still many things—more personal, everyday things—that remained unasked. There was, for example, the matter of Vicks VapoRub. I knew that Adarsh thought VapoRub was bad because he had told me not to use it, and yet he seemed to constantly be rubbing it into his temples and forehead. Why? My question made him grin. He sniffed once and told me frankly that he could not manage to stop. But then, it was not VapoRub he started talking about, but tea.

"It's not a problem of stance," he said, "It's because I cannot manage to do it. It's like people say about the matter of tea. Should we drink tea? Or should we just say no to discussion? It came up in Mohandas' program, didn't it? We have a political stance about that, but I cannot manage to do it."

The way Adarsh put this surprised me, and it stuck with me. What I found striking was, first, that Adarsh even recalled this brief part of a discussion at Mohandas' One World University ten months before. I remembered it too, but mostly because at the time I had remarked on how quickly Hari's denunciation of tea, which Adarsh paraphrased now, had been set aside. No one

seemed to think it a big deal then, and yet, when asked to evaluate his own actions, Adarsh had immediately brought it to mind. I had not even asked about tea.

But, as Adarsh continued talking, I found something else even more striking: though he admitted tea drinking was wrong, he made no attempt to justify his habit in terms of some higher value, nor excuse himself from responsibility.

"What Jyothi wrote is correct," he told me, talking about an article calling for an end to tea drinking, which he had published in *Kēraḷīyam*, "But I cannot manage to do it. I don't have that much...what to say? I don't have the determination. I don't have enough power to say no."

In this section, I analyze how certain actions that are ethically neutral for most Malayalis, like using VapoRub or drinking tea, are made ethically problematic by environmental organizers such as Hari and Adarsh. Delving further into the problem of tea drinking specifically, I investigate how this quintessentially ordinary part of Kerala social life becomes ethically "bad" for both Hari, who renounces it, and Adarsh, who practices it frequently. To do so, I go back to the discussion of tea Adarsh references above and consider Adarsh's description of his own tea drinking problem in light of Hari's speech. I describe a particular vision for social and environmental transformation in which changing the world is taken to require changing oneself. Approaching change in this way, I argue, collapses scales of social action such that in each cup of tea there is both an opportunity and an obligation to challenge injustices that pervade the social order as a whole. This example illustrates how otherwise ordinary things become targets of principled opposition for environmental organizers, making them "out of place" with respect to others and setting the stage for the tension between consistency and compromise explored in greater detail in the remainder of the chapter.

6.3 Making Tea Drinking Bad

Hari's denunciation of tea drinking happened about ten months before my interview with Adarsh, and it happened, fittingly, just after we had all returned from a tea break. It was the first day of the first session of the One World University, a series of seminars on philosophy, values, and social transformation organized by Mohandas. Since early morning, Mohandas had been explicating the concept of alienation, illustrated on a nearby chalkboard by a circular diagram of the dual division of humanity from nature and man from woman, complemented by a short list of institutions that perpetuate alienation: capitalist politics, family, religion, and modern science. As Mohandas explained at our arrival the evening before, those gathered here were selected because they had already reached a certain level of "awareness" (*bōdham*) of the problems with such institutions and are active in challenging them; thus, they are ready to appreciate his own call for re-integrating the social into one world.⁴¹ Nonetheless, as the morning wore on, eyes began to wander and heads began to nod. Everyone seemed relieved when, at last, the call for tea break came from the dining hall. And over little glass cups of sweet, milky tea, talk became more lively again. By the time we returned, Mohandas and Salim had to clap to get people to quiet down. Everyone seemed to have had enough of lecture, but they were eager to get on with discussion. Mohandas asked Hari to start things off.

⁴¹ For a more thorough discussion of the concept of *bōdham* among the organizers described here, as well as the related practice of *bōdhavalkaraṇam*, or "raising awareness," see Chapter 2.

Mohandas' Chalkboard

ഏകലോക സർവ്വകലാശാല
(One World University)

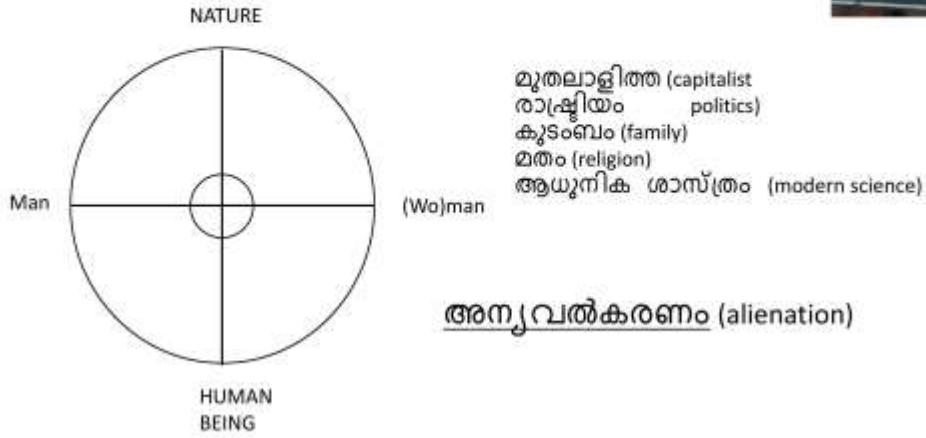


Figure 7: Photo and sketch of Mohandas' analysis of alienation

After a short silence, Hari began a speech that, at first, seemed to begin exactly where Mohandas left off. With his first words, he stated that we could expect those gathered here to have an awareness with regard to "all of this," verbally pointing back to all that Mohandas had said before, all of the stuff on the chalkboard. He stated simply that, since everyone was clear on what these larger problems were, the real question was "what should be done." And for this question he immediately proposed an answer. Social change calls for "internal transformation," he declared, saying, "There is the question of whether we, each and every individual, are ready. That question is there for me too! The issue is: 'How much can someone do?'"

And then Hari gave an example that made this point far more pointed. He gave the example of taking a tea break during a discussion about social transformation. As soon as he uttered the word "tea," there was tittering around the room, but Hari pressed on.

"At one recent camp⁴²—at the camp I went to last week, they were also doing just that. A whole lot of this sort of discussion. Very minutely, we would discuss all about changing each and every one of ourselves. But without having a drink of tea, our condition was that we could not continue with the discussion!"

Looks cut across the edges of the circle and grins broke out all around. But Hari only seemed to grow more insistent in response, speaking obliquely about the "perspective among some" that such things as tea are "insignificant," while for others with a more "detailed perspective," tea drinking is a very big *tett*, a word that can sometimes mean something like

⁴² "Camps" or "gatherings," (*kūṭṭāymakal*) are an organizing tool with roots in the early literacy and "people's science" movements of the 1960s, later adopted by environmental organizers beginning in the mid-1970s. See Chapter 3 for discussion of the centrality of camps in the organizing work of *Kēraḷīyam*. The One World University, though not specifically organized by Adarsh and Sunny, was linked to *Kēraḷīyam* in an informal way, growing out of Mohandas' close relationship with the magazine.

"error," but other times can be more like "sin."⁴³ He went on to make the case for understanding tea as a *tett*, tying tea plantations to capitalist exploitation of labor and environmental destruction. He declared that it was insupportable to believe that one can bring about real social transformation while drinking tea. And though he avoided the first-person plural and the second person throughout this portion of his speech, its accusatory implications were unavoidable.

During the remainder of that morning's discussion, the need to do something about tea drinking was affirmed by others several times, though never quite so unequivocally. In his closing speech, Mohandas explained that he did request "jappi," a concoction of local herbs invented by Kerala environmentalists as an alternative to coffee and tea, but it was unavailable. Not long after, as we stood in line in the dining hall, I overheard Adarsh and Nithin teasing Mohandas for "getting in trouble." Mohandas only smiled and shuffled down the buffet table.

6.4 Integration, Personalization, and Inconsistency

In analyzing Hari's denunciation of tea drinking, it is important to understand that tea is in multiple respects uncontroversially bad for most, if not all, of the attendees of the One World University. Though only some of those present were environmental organizers, Hari was surely right in presuming that all of them possess "awareness" with regard to the socio-political analysis diagrammed on the chalkboard. And the very existence of *jāppi* (not to mention Mohandas' excuse for not providing it) indicates that Hari is not alone in his understanding of how tea fits into this analysis. When Hari enjoined the group to cease tea drinking, he pointed to the badness

⁴³ For example, this word can be used for a grammatical error but also for what one confesses to a Catholic priest. This contrasts with the narrower semantic range of terms like *pāpam* and *tinma*, both of which denote ethical wrongs exclusively and are more often heard in religious contexts. I never heard either of the latter terms used among activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, except in jest. Activists' usage of *mūlyanṇaḷ* ("values"), described in Chapter 1, parallels this pattern of selecting broader, more ambiguous, and more secular moral language.

of tea, but his speech focused on the question of, as he put it, "what should be done." Even if tea is an exploitative, environmentally destructive product, after all, that does not necessarily mean that one should stop drinking it. It is the further connection between awareness and action that Hari was at pains to make, and it was his insistence on this that elicited laughter from the others. Below I describe how Hari made the case that abstaining from tea drinking is not only important to combating the evils of tea, but also necessary for overcoming the broader social and environmental problems Mohandas attributes to "alienation." Hari's statement of this argument is relatively extreme, as the laughter suggests, but its logic is not idiosyncratic. Rather, as Adarsh's invocation of this argument months later suggests, Hari's reasons for opposing tea drinking display a logic that environmentalists apply to many other "ordinary things" as well, such as VapoRub. Understanding the logic of Hari's denunciation of tea drinking, then, will help us to understand how everyday life comes to be full of ethical problems.

Before examining Hari's move from bad tea to bad tea drinking, however, let us review some of the reasons tea is considered uncontroversially bad, which may be less obvious to the reader than to the attendees of the One World University. In his speech, Hari points to two reasons: capitalist exploitation of the labor of farmworkers and environmentally destructive practices of monoculture farming. Within Kerala, tea is grown in large plantations in the Western Ghats mountain range, which were founded by British corporations during colonial rule. Not all tea consumed in Kerala is produced in these plantations, but when local environmentalists talk about the problems with tea, they talk about forest land cleared in these mountains, legacies of colonial exploitation of Indian resources, low wages and poor living conditions among resident laborers, fertilizers and pesticides, lost biodiversity, and corporate greed. Tea's badness is derivative of these broader social and environmental problems, all of which are taken to be

integrally connected with the political analysis Mohandas had been presenting all morning, to which we will return below.

The key to the link Hari drew between tea as an ethical problem and tea drinking as an unacceptable practice lies in his proposal of "internal transformation" (*āntarikamāya parivarttanam*) as the answer to the question of what should be done about the social problems described by Mohandas. Hari argued that in order to change these larger social problems, those present must begin by changing themselves. He raised the issue of tea drinking as an example of a failure of this process of internal transformation. In his example of the tea break at the camp the week before, he described how attendees talked a great deal about the same problems discussed at the One World University, but nonetheless continued to drink tea. For Hari, this was an unacceptable contradiction because the transformation of the self and the transformation of the world are one and the same.

The consequences of Hari's conceptualization of the unity of self-transformation and social transformation are suggested by an unusual use of pronouns in his speech. When Hari called for those present to do something, he tended to address them with first-person distributive pronomial phrases, which I gloss here as "we, each and every one" (Asher & Kumari, 1997, pp. 262, 366). As illustrated in Figure 8, Hari used these phrases frequently as subjects, and ten out of twelve (83%) uses of these distributive subjects took "can" or "should" verbs. For example, in introducing the question of "what should be done," Hari immediately rephrased this question as "what we, each and every individual, can do." In short, Hari's call for social change focused on individual action even as it addressed his audience, and himself, collectively. As a program for social change, "internal transformation" is depicted as a process that all must undertake, but it is also a process that each must undertake individually. Like drinking, or not drinking, a cup of tea.

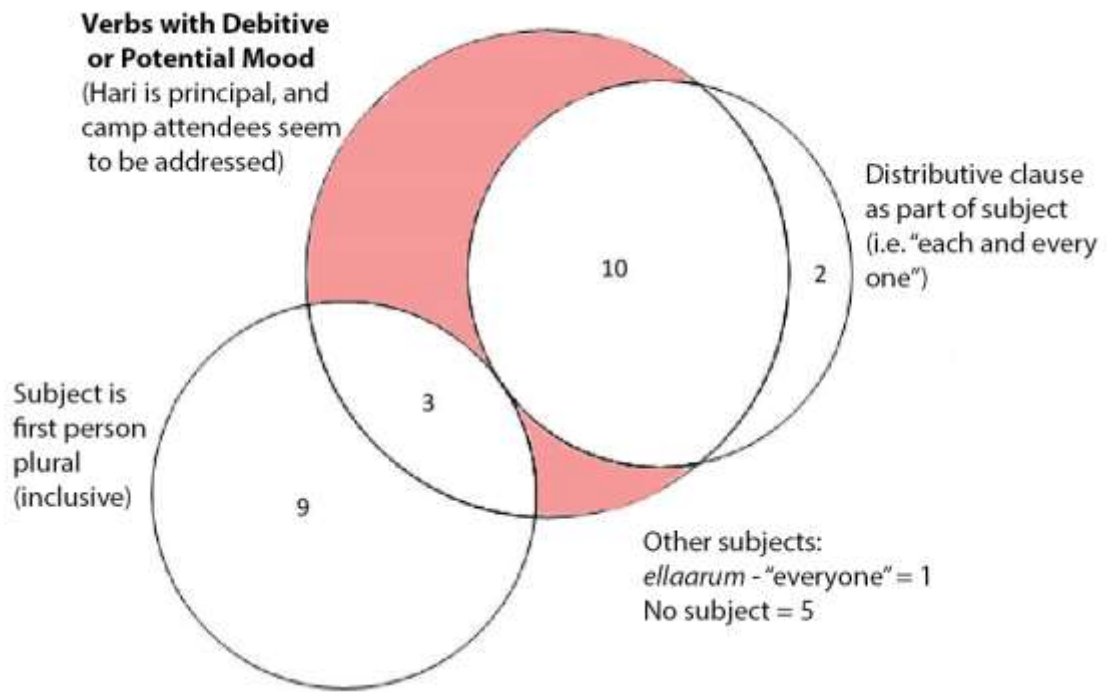


Figure 8: Distribution of subjects of debitive ("should") or potential ("can") verbs in Hari's speech

And even if the audience laughed when Hari made his appeal for internal transformation in this way, it is clear that that appeal was not without effect. Recall how quickly Adarsh made the leap from my question about VapoRub back—over ten months back—to tea. Just as it helps explain Hari's link between tea and tea drinking, this emphasis on action upon oneself as a mechanism of social transformation now also helps us understand this connection. VapoRub, like tea, is a corporate product produced by an exploitative capitalist economy. More importantly, however, it is also something that one takes into one's own body. Thus both drinking tea and applying VapoRub are actions located precisely at the nexus between the social order and the individual body, the external and the internal. In other words, they are the sort of actions in which Hari sees an opportunity to effect social change or, conversely, where commitment to social change becomes a matter of personal responsibility.

Moreover, the logic of Hari's argument for the unity of self-transformation and social transformation should also be understood against the background of the contrast Mohandas made between "alienation," as the root of modern social problems, and "integration" as their solution. Returning to Mohandas' chalkboard, capitalist politics, family, religion, modern science, gender divisions, and separation from nature are all presented as manifestations of alienation. In future seminars, Mohandas would go on to elaborate a theory of "integration" as a counter to alienation. Part of the strength of Hari's proposal for "internal transformation" is that it shares this integrating logic, refusing any rigid division between the internal and the external. Indeed, although the division between the self and the social does not appear anywhere on Mohandas' chalkboard, this was central to the concept of alienation he elaborated at the One World

University.⁴⁴

Indeed, even if many in the room found Hari's indictment of tea drinking comical, the integrating logic of this indictment was surely intuitive, an offshoot of a shared genealogy of claims about the unity of body and world, self-transformation and social transformation. In particular, while few present would have claimed to be disciples of Gandhi, his politics of *swarāj*, or "self-rule," nonetheless looms large in the "awareness" that qualifies one for participation in the One World University. In Gandhi's ideal of *swarāj*, power over the body and power over the nation were inseparable; without the development of the former, India could never attain true independence (Alter, 2000; Fox, 1989; Gandhi, 2009). Moreover, Gandhi's integration of struggle with the British and struggle with the body itself has roots in broadly South Asian understandings of personhood, in which the self participates in the social and material world through the exchange or avoidance of substances such as food, bodily fluids, or soil (Alter, 2000; Marriott, 1968, 1976). As anthropologists have long argued, the passage of substances into, out of, and between bodies confounds any rigid boundary between South Asian understandings of person and environment, or of self and society (Daniel, 1984; Marriott, 1976). It is no coincidence, then, that Gandhi's experiments with truth were largely dietary, nor that Hari and Adarsh see political struggle in tea and VapoRub.

However, in contrast with most accounts of South Asian substance exchange, Gandhi and Hari both pursue the incorporation or non-incorporation of substances as a mechanism for radical social transformation, making the integration of internal and external the basis for a claim about the responsibility of the self to a cause. Thus, the "porousness" (K. Smith, 2012) between

⁴⁴ One reason this distinction may have gone unnoted on the chalkboard is that it is already taken to be implicit in the notion of "alienation" (*anyavalkaraṇam*), a term with etymological roots in translations of Marxist texts into Malayalam.

the self and the social becomes a conduit not only for substances, but also for demands on one's own body and one's own action. Scales of social action and responsibility are collapsed, and the body becomes suffused with opportunities and obligations of far-reaching import. Everyday life proliferates with the imperatives of building a free and strong nation, in Gandhi's case, or of confronting economic and environmental injustices, in Hari's.

This story could also be told in an entirely different way. Just as Hari and Adarsh's concern with tea drinking has many of the markings of a specifically Gandhian pedigree of South Asian personhood, it is also an unmistakable instance of a global type.⁴⁵ Hari's claim about tea drinking shares much with appeals by locavores, vegetarians, and proponents of fair trade and organic products in other parts of the world. Indeed, the reasons he gives for avoiding tea—exploitation of labor and destruction of the environment—resemble the reasoning of these global "ethical consumption" movements more than the anthropological theories about substance and personhood cited above (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2010; Carrier, 2007; Lewis & Potter, 2011). And this resemblance is not spurious; the attendees of the One World University are well aware of these movements and familiar with the ideologies that underwrite them. Like Gandhi's "self-rule," the ideology of ethical consumption collapses scales of social action, framing the market as an engagement between the self and the social and framing particular acts of purchasing as opportunities and obligations with respect to a greater cause (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005).⁴⁶ Thus, it is quite possible for Hari to simultaneously invoke both

⁴⁵ Thanks to Michael Silverstein for suggesting this point.

⁴⁶ Some scholars have argued that the link between acts of purchasing and social transformation in ethical consumption is illusory, however, inasmuch as it reduces politics to consumption alone (Carrier, 2008; Dolan, 2007). This argument could also be made with respect to the focus on self-transformation among the organizers described here. Indeed, the description of Hari's choice of ethical consistency over compromise might be taken to exemplify the problems with excessive

specifically South Asian models of personhood and globally salient notions of ethical consumption at once. The move from bad tea to bad tea drinking is bolstered by the confluence of these two ideologies, both of which translate commitment to radical social change into the acts of "each and every one of us."

But if Hari's denunciation of tea drinking is grounded in understandings and commitments that attendees of the One World University share, why do they laugh at him? The humor here, I would argue, lies not in the logic of Hari's appeal but in the practical difficulties of carrying it out. Such difficulties are suggested by Adarsh's admission that he shares Hari's position on tea drinking but simply "can't manage to do it." They are also suggested by Hari's own story of the seminar participants who, similarly, could not carry on their discussion of social transformation without a tea break. To better understand these difficulties, we turn now from the problem of how ethical evaluation proliferates in the lives of organizers to the ways in which this proliferation is experienced as a problem for social relations.

6.5 Inconsistent or Out of Place: Problems with Alignment

Adarsh drinks more tea than anyone I know, and he drinks it double strong. In the fourteen months that we lived together, he would occasionally tell me that he wanted to cut back, but it never happened. As noted above, he recognized that drinking tea was inconsistent with his own political views. When he published an article in *Kēraḷīyam* making a case against tea drinking similar to Hari's argument, others pointed this inconsistency out to him. And this made him uncomfortable. But he could not manage to stop. For Adarsh, as for many Malayalis, drinking tea was an integral part of everyday routines of face-to-face interaction; he drank a lot

focus on self-transformation in efforts at social change. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this chapter.

of tea primarily because he engaged in a lot of interaction. Whenever someone stopped by the magazine office, it would not be long before a trip to the nearby tea shop was proposed. And few proposals went unaccepted.

To some extent, we might attribute Adarsh's tea habit to the addictive properties of caffeine, or to mere inertia. We cannot rule out these factors. However, here I want to suggest another possibility: that refusing tea, the most ubiquitous social drink in India, was difficult because of the consequences it would have had for Adarsh's relations to others. I explore this possibility as an instance of the more general problem, introduced above, of how opposition to ordinary things can make someone "out of place." Why should a person's evaluation of some object as ethically wrong have consequences for their relations to others? Keeping with the example of tea drinking just a bit longer, I turn to literature on evaluation and ethics for resources to answer this question.

In Chapter 3, I introduced the concept of stance to describe the ways in which iconicity between multiple subjects' evaluations of an object can entail relations of alignment. The stance triangle (see Figure 5, pg. 109) provides a framework for describing how evaluation could be understood as a way of relating to others, but it is not enough to explain the kind of social separation I have described above as being "out of place." Alignment and disalignment, in and of themselves, are only descriptions of relations between evaluative positions of discursive subjects; they say nothing about the consequences of evaluation for other aspects of how social relations are experienced, such as felt solidarity or antagonism. Although conversation analysts have demonstrated a statistical "preference" for alignment of stance, this does not mean there is any psychological or sociocultural preference for agreement (Sidnell, 2010). Moreover, it is clear that the social consequences of alignment differ for different contexts and kinds of evaluation. For

example, because of a caffeine sensitivity, I often did not drink tea with Adarsh and others even when I went to the tea shop with them. Clearly, this disaligned me with them as far as tea was concerned; they liked it, I did not. But this never seemed to interfere with my ability to sit and chat with them. I did not feel out of place—at least no more out of place than usual. Certainly, if this kind of disalignment was all that was at stake for Adarsh in quitting tea, it is hard to see how relations to others had anything to do with the difficulty of quitting.

The crucial difference between Adarsh's stance with respect to tea and mine, however, is that while my stance has only to do with tea's effects upon my own body, Adarsh's stance is grounded in a program for social transformation. My stance has to do with what is important for me, specifically, while Adarsh's stance has to do with what he believes is important for India, or even for the world. As such, Adarsh's stance not only positions him with respect to tea drinking, but also implies that others ought to position themselves in the same way.⁴⁷ And this makes alignment and disalignment potentially far more consequential in Adarsh's case than mine.

In an analysis of evaluation that shares much with the notion of "stance," Adam Smith observed that alignment or disalignment with another person's evaluations can, itself, entail a second-level evaluation of the other person's evaluation (2002, p. 21).⁴⁸ This is obviously the case in Hari's appeal to stop tea drinking, which is not only an evaluation of tea drinking, but also an evaluation of the positions of others with respect to tea drinking. And we can now see how, if Adarsh refrained from drinking tea in the company of friends, even if he made no explicit

⁴⁷ What makes Adarsh's stance ethical is, in part, that it implies a claim about the stance one *ought* to take, but this claim need not be universal, as some theories of ethics propose. For more detailed explication of this point, see the discussion of the definition of ethics in Chapter 5.

⁴⁸ Smith takes this to be a much more general feature of evaluation than I do here, however, arguing that it holds for all contexts and types of evaluation.

appeal to them to stop drinking as well, this would imply a similar evaluation of their positions.⁴⁹ Thus, we find that for certain kinds of stance, disalignment with another subject implies opposition to that subject's position.

For the organizers described here, the proliferation of ethical concerns in everyday life entails a potential proliferation of such oppositions. This is how they find themselves socially distant, or "out of place." With this understanding of what evaluation does to social relations, we can also understand why an organizer, in particular, might find it difficult to accept this social distancing. As described in Chapter 3, Adarsh's work as assistant editor of *Kēraḷīyam* is primarily about connecting people, assembling a network of organizers who participate in a particular form of political action. Taking tea breaks with people who stop by the office is a crucial part of this work. Avoiding tea breaks probably would not affect Adarsh's ability to publish the magazine, but it would surely hinder his efforts to connect people—that is, his efforts to organize. Moreover, based on the analysis above, we can expect that this organizing work would be hindered all the more if Adarsh were to avoid tea breaks *as a matter of principle*, as Hari does.

Given this difficulty, why not just take radical stances more opportunistically? For example, why not just avoid tea when it is convenient, and drink tea when avoiding it would strain relationships? As we will see, this is the approach that Adarsh pursues with many of his

⁴⁹ In the literature on South Asian personhood described above, people manage their exchange or non-exchange of substances *in order to* create solidarity or social distance with respect to others. Marriott (1968) argues that the caste system is sustained precisely through the social effects of such exchanges. In such cases, group solidarity and distinction are the values that determine the desirability of exchange. In this case, however, environmental organizers (following Gandhi) take up similar practices for a different purpose, and the goodness or badness of incorporating a substance is determined by its relation to this purpose (i.e. social and environmental transformation). Nonetheless, they experience the social effects of exchanging or avoiding substances as an inevitable outcome of the mechanisms of evaluation described here.

more radical stances. But as we have already observed with respect to tea drinking, this kind of inconsistency can also be uncomfortable, and the stance triangle suggests why. Note that alignment and disalignment are relations between subjects of particular acts of stancetaking, not a relation of persons. Thus, across multiple instances of stancetaking, the same person can occupy subject positions that are disaligned with one another. The same could be said of evaluation more generally. Such is the case, Hari argues, with those who take tea breaks while plotting to change the world. This is the problem of inconsistency. And for the same reasons that disalignment with others may strain social relations, disalignment between one's subject positions (particularly with respect to ethical evaluation) may, as Hari suggests, trouble one's relation to oneself.

But one cannot always have it both ways. The more that ordinary things become objects of ethical evaluation, the more one is faced with a choice between alignment between one's positions and alignment with others. Such dilemmas are a central problem for all of the organizers described here, but different people respond to them in very different ways. Below, I analyze Hari's and Adarsh's responses to different versions of this problem, arising from the radical positions they take with respect to allopathic medicine and houses, respectively. In both cases, these responses involve a tradeoff between consistency and compromise.

6.6 Standing Fast

At the end of second gathering of the One World University, Hari announced that he would not be returning for any more. There was too much discussion, he said, and not enough action. And after that, I did not see him again at any *Kēraḷīyam*-related events for a long time. I heard about him from time to time, especially from a close friend of his, Salim, with whom Hari had been trying to establish an organic farming commune. It was Salim who had first introduced

me to Hari several years before, when I was studying Malayalam. Back then, the two used to talk like one of those superhero teams on TV—always in lock-step, finishing each other's sentences—which was fitting, I guess, because they were also always talking about how to save the world, though usually turning to farming and dietary regimens, rather than fighting crime. It was through their visits that I first became familiar with many of the ideas represented on Mohandas' chalkboard—the critical analysis of modern science, capitalism, and the family—and it was with them that I had my first cup of *jāppi*. But more recently, Salim talked with concern about Hari—he had taken the dieting too far, Salim felt, and his body had become thin and weak. He was too confident in his own conviction that eating only fruits would heal all of his ailments, and he would not listen to anyone else's advice. Then, the organic farming commune disbanded, and Salim told me that he and Hari did not speak much anymore.

There are many ways to tell this story. Adarsh suggested that Hari may have simply become more involved in a different social circle, a network of post-Gandhian environmentalists focused more on diet. The failure of the commune itself is a complicated story, with multiple actors, multiple accusations, and multiple reasons to part ways. But here, I want to focus on a story that Hari himself told when, wanting to know what had become of him, I went to visit him at his parents' home near the end of my fieldwork. I focus on this story because I think it brings out important aspects of how Hari's approach to radical ethical evaluation had changed during the time I had known him. As Hari tells it, it is the story of a conflict between consistency and community, between truth and friendship.

The story begins about a year before the first session of the One World University, during a time when Hari was nearly constantly traveling, attending environmentalist camps focused on

"nature cure" as a way of life.⁵⁰ Unlike the One World University, these natural lifestyle camps had no clear connection to *Kēraḷīyam* magazine, though during this time many of those in the *Kēraḷīyam* crowd were also into natural health and medicine. These social circles would become more distinguished from one another during the period of my fieldwork. At the time, however, Hari moved in both of these circles and was very active. Indeed, this was a time of intense inquiry and experimentation for Hari—I remember meeting him at one point during this period and being impressed with the sheer energy and zeal with which he spoke about his new way of life and about the potential of nature cure to heal, enlighten, and change the world.

Hari also met a young woman named Sunathi at one of these nature cure camps, and they attended many together, beginning a romantic relationship. A few months after they met, a small but persistent sore appeared on her lower leg, near her ankle. Hari advised her to eat a simpler diet and to eat only fruit for one meal per day. Sunathi, trusting the advice from the nature cure camps as well as Hari's own expertise, followed these instructions carefully. The sore grew and became two. Hari advised making two meals only fruit. The sores continued to multiply and grow, until she had one long, oozing wound from her ankle to her thigh. By this time, she had been eating fruit exclusively for about a month. Hari advised that she rest, and stick to her dietary regimen, and Sunathi followed his advice.

⁵⁰ In Kerala, nature cure (*prakṛti cikilsa*) is a practice with roots in Gandhi's integration of German and American nature cure (also known as naturopathy) with Indian healing traditions including Ayurveda and Siddha. The central tenet of naturopathy, that the body will heal itself provided that the right internal balance is maintained, has clear convergences with the "substance exchange" theories of the body and personhood discussed above. Hari's own medical beliefs and practices, described below, are more closely related to orthopathy (known in the US as "natural hygiene"), a version of naturopathy of nineteenth-century American origin that is especially focused on diet.

"Finally the wound reached up the whole leg. It was all bluish and seeping," Hari told me, "This wound, if anyone saw it, they would have said that because it had not been treated it had gotten infected, and that the infection had spread to the whole leg. Any average person, who doesn't understand, they would not say it is not healing. Not only that. When you only eat fruits, your body gets very thin. You lose weight. So people would say your health is declining."

As far as Hari was concerned, however, the seeping wound was not a problem; on the contrary, it was a sign that Sunathi's body was expelling whatever toxins were causing her sickness. There was, however, what he called a "social problem."

"The problem is you can't do this in this society. Because if they see a wound that's been seeping for one or two months, they will make some big problem over it, and make her go to an allopathy hospital and diagnose it."

Hari arranged for Sunathi to be taken to a naturopathy hospital, where she continued her regimen of fruit and rest. But the problems did not stop there. Some of Hari's friends, particularly in the *Kēraḷīyam* circle, also opposed Sunathi's treatment. He began to receive phone calls urging him to take Sunathi to a Western hospital.

"So these people—all of them, even Salim—all of these people misunderstood and said that it would be some big disaster...Everyone, even Sunny called me. But I had complete faith. But mentally, I had a lot of conflict because everyone was together against me. That was the state of things."

In the end, after almost five months of fruit and bed rest, the wound healed. Not only that, but Hari reported that Sunathi's asthma had disappeared, and a chronic skin problem had cleared up as well. But despite the apparent success of his treatment, Hari's social problems lingered. Soon after Sunathi got better, Hari attended Sunny's wedding. There, he says, people made fun of

him and made jokes about how he only eats fruit. Not only at that event, but at camps he attended thereafter, even camps about nature cure, people would tease him and make comments about him.

"I hear these kind of jokes a lot," he said, "But they're not just jokes. They're another way of saying, "what you are doing is a *tett*."

Here is that ambiguous word again: *tett*. Only this time it is not Hari directing it at others, but Hari voicing others directing it at himself. And note that a related ambiguity is present in the whole of Hari's story. One might say that it is a story about medicine—about conflicting answers to purely factual questions about how the body works, what causes disease, or how best to treat a wound. But, here, medicine is a profoundly moral matter—not only because Western medicine is generally held to be morally corrupt by environmentalists in Kerala, but because Sunathi's leg, and perhaps more, hangs in the balance. Salim and Sunny held Hari responsible for Sunathi's treatment because she had been following his directions, and even when those directions worked, a stigma remained. Hari believed that Sunathi had been healed because he had refused to be swayed from his stance. But it was for this same reason that he found himself increasingly alone.

"I told them precisely and tried to make them understand," he said, "And I stood, and stood, and stood, and at last the wound dried up."

A similar story could be told about the farming commune. According to Salim, the collaboration had failed primarily because of a disagreement about farming methods. Hari had insisted that the farm not only be organic, but also "natural," meaning that no fertilizer, not even cow manure, should be added to the soil. And, of course, we have already examined Hari's condemnation of tea. In each story, Hari has insisted on following through on his ethical views. Indeed, in Sunathi's case, while he clearly anticipated that "an average person" would have

opposed his treatment, he seemed surprised by the reaction of those who otherwise shared many of his radical positions. These were people who had attended camps with him, and who knew the evils of Western medicine. Yet, they did not want him to follow through.

6.7 Consistency and Cosmology

Before returning to the social consequences of Hari's consistency—to the problem of being "out of place"—I want to more closely examine how, exactly, Hari sustains such radical stances. Although he spoke of simply, "standing, standing, and standing," in response to criticism of his treatment of Sunathi, Hari's ability to remain unmoved by such criticism required a great deal of ideological labor—that is, a great deal of justification. In our interview, his telling of the story was larded with such justifications, and he continued to elaborate on the larger reasons that justified his decisions about Sunathi even when the story itself had been fully told, happy ending and all.

As mentioned above, the time of Sunathi's illness was also a time of intense inquiry and learning for Hari. Even as his social world was troubled by conflict, Hari was constructing a cosmology in which all of the pieces fit harmoniously. He had told me the story about Sunathi, in part, as one illustration of this ideological construct. As an example of the power of nature cure, Sunathi's healing also demonstrated the power of the theory of nature (*prakṛti*) on which nature cure was based. This broader theory not only justified Hari's own actions in the story; it denied any reason for uncertainty or doubt with regard to his decisions whatsoever. It was a total justification.

"But weren't you ever afraid at all?" I asked Hari when he described how all his friends had turned against him, "Weren't you afraid that it might not work out?"

"No. I was never afraid," he replied immediately. "No, no, no. Because what I believe is

that, yes, the body has limits. If illness reaches too severe a stage, then it is hard to come back. For example, if someone has lived a very unnatural life or something like that. But humans have never discovered any medicinal intervention that can cross the body's own limits—of that much I am sure. So yes, the body has limits, but it is also not possible for humans to discover anything that will cross those limits. So maybe the body would not have been able to heal [Sunathi's] wound, but then there isn't any medicine in the world that could have healed her. There is no such thing."

In this interview, and in further discussion the following day, Hari elaborated a conception of nature (*prakṛti*) as a complete integration of the physical and social world, in which the practices of science, politics, and spirituality are all subsumed within a larger balanced ecology, and health and ethics are indistinguishable. In this cosmology, nature is perfectly balanced and complete unto itself, and only the introduction of something foreign or unnatural could disturb this balance. Thus, for example, the etiology of disease is always some toxin introduced by unnatural human practices—the presence of microorganisms is only a byproduct of the imbalance engendered by the toxin.⁵¹ Just as medicine was about allowing the body to restore balance, Hari argued, politics, spirituality, and other practices oriented by ethical values must be harmonized in alignment with the ecological balance of the natural world. Hari's ideas share much with Mohandas' emphasis on the centrality of the reintegration of humanity and nature in addressing social problems. Indeed, the central themes of integration and ecological balance resonated with ideas I had heard from others in the *Kēraḷīyam* crowd. Here, however, the

⁵¹ This view is traceable to a mid-twentieth-century appropriation of Antoine Béchamp's dispute with Louis Pasteur during the period of the early development of germ theory, commonly referenced by proponents of naturopathy (E. D. Hume, 1923; Manchester, 2001). Hari had studied Béchamp's ideas extensively on the internet, where he had found some translations of his work.

integration and balance were more comprehensively developed and systematized so as to eliminate contradiction.

Ultimately, Hari's cosmology produces moral certainty. There are no ethical dilemmas because there are no contradictions between ethical values. There are no conflicts between ethical value and other sorts of value because all forms of value are aligned with the natural order. Thus, in the case of Sunathi's illness, what will cure her is, by definition, also the ethically preferred option. This is strikingly different from the ideological position of many others in the *Kēraḷīyam* network, who shared Hari's opposition to the politics of Western medicine but, nonetheless, often acknowledge its efficacy in a pinch. But within Hari's cosmology, what is ethically objectionable is also necessarily ineffective. Political goods, moral goods, the goods of health—all come together.

In some sense, then, Hari's cosmology resembles what Williams (1985) has called a "morality system," in which all questions of ethical value are maximally subordinated to some explicit, over-riding logic. Building on Williams' concept, Keane (2016) argues that the explicit ideological constructs of morality systems make otherwise tacit values and practices more available for manipulation and revision. Thus, he observes that social reformers often work to revise morality systems (Keane, 2016, p. 200). Certainly, we can see such revision in Hari's own work on cosmology. Moreover, Williams argues that morality systems work to reduce contradiction and uncertainty in ethical life (1985, pp. 176, 178). However, Hari's cosmology differs from Williams' account of morality systems in the ways that it reduces contradiction. In Williams' account, morality systems eliminate contradictions by giving primacy to obligations, which trump all other considerations of value; where there is a moral obligation, all other considerations must be set aside (1985, p. 195). Here, however, Hari reduces contradiction not

by trumping but by aligning—other sorts of value are simply taken to be inherently non-contradictory with ethical value, since all value is part of the natural order. Dilemmas are not resolved, but harmonized away.

Even as Hari's cosmology enables a high level of moral certainty, it also raises challenges for Hari's relations to others. Hari turned to this topic explicitly near the end of my visit, when he told me that he no longer attends *Kēraḷīyam* events because "there is no space there for [him] to speak." To some extent, as Adarsh suggested, this might be understood as a shift from the *Kēraḷīyam* social circle to another group for whom natural lifestyles are more central. But note that Hari says he has been teased even when he attends camps about nature cure. And when I visited him, he described himself as no longer participating in camps much at all. He was living a quiet life at his parents' home, working at a nearby government agency, where he said he did not talk much about his radical views. His bedroom was stacked with old books and heavily-underlined printouts of nineteenth-century writings by American "natural hygiene" theorists, such as Isaac Jennings and Sylvester Graham. He frequently referred back to these works, and the lives of their authors, as he described his own ideas and way of life. If anything, he seemed to have found his new community among these radical men.⁵²

Hari did not set out to isolate himself, but he worked to ensure consistency and certainty—all of his stances were made to align with one another, whether explicitly stated evaluations or evaluative positions implicit in his actions and in his way of life. But alignment

⁵² This is not to say that Hari's point of view on these matters was entirely unique. My conversations with other practitioners of orthopathy and naturopathy in Kerala revealed a similar familiarity with the ideas of men like Béchamp, Jennings, and Graham. Malayali *prakṛti cikilsa* was a fractious tradition, however, with many ideological splits and offshoots. This was probably due to the tendency of many practitioners, like Hari, to part ways based on differences of conviction.

between his own radical positions also put him out of alignment with others, and this had consequences for his friendships. Hari did not cut himself off from everyone. He was able to live in peace with his family and his coworkers, but largely because he did not talk to them much about his ideas about nature, health, or social change. And to that extent, these were minimal relations. Hari had built his whole life around these ideas, these radical positions—they were who he was. Thus, not only did he not talk about his opinions at work; he said he rarely talked at all. At home, it was a bit different. There, he told me how he slowly, gently worked to influence his parents' views, to somehow show them that his way of living was right. In this way, he sought to gradually bring these relationships into alignment with the rest of his world, a world that was built to support a maximally consistent self.

6.8 Compromise and Community

As shown by the theater example, Adarsh, like Hari, often found himself "out of place" because of his efforts to live consistently with his radical views. Even if he was not as consistent as Hari, as in the case of tea drinking, he did experience the tensions that radical positions on aspects of everyday life raised for his relationships, especially relationships with common people (*sādhāraṇakkār*). Indeed, one might say that this was more of a problem for Adarsh because, more than Hari, he valued sustaining such relationships despite disalignment with respect to ethical or political views. For example, at the very end of our discussion of his tea drinking habit, just as I began to change the subject, he interrupted me to assert that being inconsistent is not the worst thing one can do; far worse are those at the other extreme, who will not even *talk* to people who drink tea.

"I disagree with the higher puritan sort of stance⁵³ in that. Won't talk to a person who drinks tea! I'm against that kind of puritanism. That's a terribly...in that there's a terrible sort of fascism! A prejudice is there, in saying like that."

Thus, even as Adarsh acknowledged the badness of his lack of consistency, he also pointed out a badness that comes from an excess of consistency—a puritanical, fascist consistency that would not even allow for speaking to others who drink tea. Adarsh went on to talk about how Hari and people like him were not very active in the *Kēraḷīyam* social circle anymore. He said that they had mostly split off and formed their own group. As we have seen, Hari's story was more complicated than that. But what Adarsh keenly identified here was the connection between too much consistency and social isolation. For Adarsh, such isolation was more than an unfortunate side-effect of a radical way of life; here, at least, he placed the onus of responsibility on those who carry consistency too far. He described those who put consistency above social relations as refusing to talk to those with whom they disagree. If they become pariahs, that is only because they insist on being puritans.

If Hari responds to tensions between his ethical views and other aspects of social relations by intensively pursuing consistency between his own positions, Adarsh's responses tend in the other direction, toward compromise in the interest of community. It should already be clear from the analysis above, of course, that this is not an absolute contrast. Just as Hari finds ways of getting along with his parents and coworkers, so Adarsh sometimes finds himself out of place among his neighbors or at odds with his father. But Adarsh also attributes value to

⁵³ The Malayalam noun *nilapāṭ*, glossed here as "stance," tropes on the verb for physically standing, *nilkkuka*, just as the English term does. Hari and Adarsh both used this term in talking about their views. However, I have sought not to make too much of that connection here, as it should not to be taken to suggest any neat convergence between the language ideologies of sociolinguists and Malayali organizers.

compromise in a way that Hari, in our conversations, never did. And for Adarsh, the value of compromise often trumps consistency. Below I take a close look at such a compromise with regard to one of the "ordinary" matters that Adarsh feels most strongly about: his opposition to house and family.

6.9 Living in Common

Ever since I moved in with Adarsh and Faiza, our neighbor from across the street, Santosh, had been inviting me to join him for his morning walk. As the months passed, this invitation gave way to another—to come and see the new house he was building on the other side of town. In fact, this was still the same invitation in new garb; Santosh's daily route took him from his current house to the site where his new house was being constructed and back, all before 7am. I sincerely wanted to accept this invitation, but for me 7am was a time for sleeping or, given some momentous event related to the topics of my imagined dissertation, rushing to catch a bus to "the field." The right day for a morning walk never seemed to arrive. At last, Santosh agreed to shift one walk to the evening, for me, and we set out.

All the way there, and all the way back, we talked about houses. We talked about the house where Santosh currently lived with his older brother Ravindran's family, and about how excited he was to finally build a house for his own family (himself, his wife, and their twin daughters), even if it was only small. We talked about how Ravindran also planned to tear down his house and build a new one—a house more like those on either side of it, with a flat concrete roof rather than a peaked clay one—even though the current house was still in pretty good shape. And we talked about the houses we saw along the way, especially the ones Santosh thought best—huge double-story mansions with ten-foot walls and wrought iron gates.

"Super house!" Santosh exclaimed, as we passed one of the largest of these, "What a

beautiful house!"

I had to hold back a laugh then, remembering that Adarsh had also exclaimed over this exact same house when we had gone for an evening walk a few months before. Only Adarsh's exclamation, which I had noted without recording his exact words, had been sarcastic and disapproving. Indeed, this house had gotten Adarsh started on a short, comical rant about Malayalis who build such huge structures for just a few people, and find them so beautiful when they destroy all of the natural beauty around. And here, Santosh was talking about much the same thing, only with none of the irony; these houses were as beautiful in his eyes as they were, supposedly, in the eyes of the owners Adarsh ridiculed.

In Kerala, nearly every adult I met was either saving to build a new house, building a new house, or had just built a new house. Some, like Santosh, had to save for a very long time to build a very small house, but they were still saving. Buying a house that someone else had built, no matter how large, was not considered nearly as desirable as building one's own house according to one's own design. This is not to say that the design of a home was a matter of individual expression; rather, housing projects generally conformed carefully to current fashions and other projects in the neighborhood. Thus, Santosh's and Ravindran's houses would have concrete roofs, as was the fashion, despite their shared opinion that houses with clay tile roofs are cooler and more comfortable.

This conformity to trends is understandable because, in Kerala, a family's house is the dominant icon of a family's status and prosperity. And as should be clear from Santosh's story, it is the nuclear family that matters here. The association of the house with a family's status likely has a deeper history in joint family habitation practices, but in contemporary Kerala, parents build and renovate houses for themselves and their children. For example, when I pressed

Ravindran on the matter, he explained that the reason he wanted to rebuild was that he did not want his son to feel the shame of coming home to a house with a clay roof when all the neighbors had flat, concrete roofs. Likewise, parents undertake renovations in preparation for the arrangement of their children's marriages, hoping to secure the best partner and impress the other family. A couple who rents, one neighbor told me, would find it impossible to marry their children.

In other words, with respect to houses as with multiplex theaters, Adarsh finds himself at odds with the general view. Ever since he and Faiza married, they have rented, and if Adarsh had his way they would never stop renting. Adarsh is—as Faiza put it to me once—“*vīṭṭinetirē*,” or “opposed to [the institution of] house.” This is an apt way of putting it because Adarsh is not only against owning a house himself, but against the institution of the family home, and the forms of social relations it represents. In Malayalam, the most common word for house, *vīṭ*, can also be used to refer to one's family. For example, the surname used by members of one's family is one's “house name” (*vīṭṭupēr*).⁵⁴ As Faiza suggests, Adarsh's opposition to *vīṭ* is not only rooted in environmentalist disapproval of quarrying and the destruction of natural beauty, but also in his objections to prevalent Indian forms of kinship. Adarsh is against the family. He criticized the Indian institution of family as patriarchal, repressive of children's individuality, and supportive of caste inequities. Just as the house is generally taken to be iconic of the family, so Adarsh's opposition to the hierarchical and coercive aspects of kin relations motivated his opposition to homeownership.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ One's *vīṭṭupēr* is, specifically, the name shared by one's lineage, whether through the matrilineal or patrilineal line. However, people also use caste names or the names of their villages as surnames.

⁵⁵ For the sake of brevity, I do not discuss the details of Adarsh's many grievances with house and family here. Note, however, that family is one of the institutions in Mohandas' diagram that

And yet, as with tea, it would seem that Adarsh was not following through. First, because he and Faiza had begun their own nuclear family, albeit an inter-caste, inter-religious one. And additionally, because during the time that I was visiting he and Faiza began looking to purchase a house. Adarsh refused to be directly involved in this; whenever I asked about it, he said that he had no idea what was going on with it and had no interest in the matter. But he knew Faiza and her father were going to look at houses and, other than occasional grumbling and complaints, he made no effort to stop them. He was resigned to becoming a homeowner.

"I really have no interest in owning a house," he said, "But for that very reason, it doesn't depend on my decision. If [Faiza] is interested, then maybe that isn't the sort of thing I should insist on. Because all of the reasons behind my decisions might be very different."

Adarsh was not certain what Faiza's reasons were for wanting a house. He suggested that it might be simply that women, generally, have a different understanding of comfort. Or perhaps, he said, it might be because of differences in their childhood experiences of house and family. Either way, given the difference between their perspectives, he thought it was best for him to let Faiza go ahead with looking for a house. He thought it was best to compromise.

Adarsh's relativist approach to the decision to buy a home prioritized other forms of relationship over alignment of ethical stance; even if he was opposed to owning a home, what was more important was that he must live together with Faiza. Thus, he was willing to allow for some inconsistency between his ethical views and his way of life in exchange for sharing his life with her. Here we can see a valuation of family creeping into Adarsh's own position with respect to homeownership, despite his opposition to *vīṭ* being partly rooted in criticism of the subversion

are understood to perpetuate alienation. Adarsh's views on family and house were broadly shared with others in the *Kēraḷīyam* network. Such views were taken to be integral to the political analysis described above as "awareness."

of individual freedom to family control. With regard to purchasing a house, his individual preference must be subordinated to Faiza's desire to have a house. Of course, insofar as he is the one deferring to Faiza, the logic of control here differs from the patriarchal hierarchy Adarsh criticizes. Nonetheless, in agreeing to buy a house, Adarsh is doubly compromising his opposition to family, both in the decision taken and in the way that decision is taken.

But why is Adarsh willing to compromise? To answer that question, it is important to understand Adarsh's ambivalence about family. Again and again, he says he is opposed to family, to *vīṭ*. This was a refrain I heard often during our time living together. But in discussing his accession to Faiza's decision, Adarsh also noted that there is one good thing about family relationships: compared to friends, kin do not part ways so easily.

"With friends, if we get in a fight for some reason, maybe that relationship will break. But with family, even if we fight, somehow that relationship will continue. Take me and my father—we are always fighting, always arguing. If he was not my father, maybe we'd just stop talking to each other. But maybe the reason that relation continues, even though we fight, maybe it's because of that blood relation...But we should have that toward everyone, hear! But that sort of bond, it amazes me sometimes. Even if we have some difference of opinion, that bond still stays! I only see that kind of bond in the family."

Despite his opposition to the family, Adarsh articulates a value that he believes is best realized in blood relations; he describes sustaining a relationship as an end in itself.⁵⁶ Once again, he uses a metaphor of talking to suggest that differences of opinion should not be a reason to avoid relationship altogether. Not only family relationships, but other bonds should be

⁵⁶ The notion of something being an "end in itself" or "good in its own right" is also used to describe what is distinct about ethical value. For further discussion of this definition of ethics, and what it means for something to be taken as an "end in itself" in practice, see Chapter 5.

sustained despite different views. Thus, Adarsh is ambivalent about family, but he also suggests that a certain ambivalence is a good thing in relationships. Whereas for Hari social relationships are increasingly defined by alignment in pursuit of consistency, Adarsh envisions an expansion to all relationships of the sort of bonds he sees among kin, which endure regardless of evaluative alignment or disalignment.

Adarsh is willing to compromise because he values forms of relation other than shared ethical positions, and he is willing to give up consistency for this other value. He is willing to own a house, despite being opposed to owning a house, because he values relationship with Faiza. This is not an alignment of value, not a win-win; it is a trade-off. This logic of exchange is fundamentally different from what we see in Hari's cosmological work above. For Hari, all forms of value are constructed so as to be in harmony with one another; to follow through on one's stance is also to be healthy, politically effective, and spiritually fulfilled. The one area in which Hari must make a trade-off is with regard to social relationships, and there he chooses internal consistency over relations to others. But for Adarsh, because relations to others are valuable in and of themselves, consistency must frequently be compromised. Having a wife who disagrees with him about homeownership translates into owning a home despite being against homes. For Adarsh, such compromises may still be experienced as a failure, as is suggested by his frustration with being unable to stop drinking tea. But these failures are accepted as necessary in order to sustain relationships.

6.10 Activists Against the World, Activists in the World

Both Hari's and Adarsh's approaches to the tension between being consistent and sustaining social relations can, to some extent, be seen in the stories of every activist I encountered in my fieldwork. Others told me stories of cutting ties with family, of being

strangers in their home villages, and of struggling to find companions that shared their views. Just as Hari and Salim's farming commune failed because of disagreements over correct cultivation practices, there were many stories of other collaborations, other communes, started with great expectation and dissolved in frustration over differences of opinion. Activists often talked to me about how much more they could have done if only they could have worked together.

The problem, I heard again and again, was ego. However, studying stories like Hari's closely, we might say that ego is too easy an answer, if by ego one only means selfishness or pride. Rather, activists' collaborations were often predisposed to fail by the fact that they were made up of activists. Like Hari, these were people who had set themselves apart by choosing to live according to their radical evaluative positions despite the difficulties those positions created for relationships. When they broke with their families or their villages, they chose consistency with their views over continuity of relationship. That is part of what made them out of place among the "common people" (*sādhāraṇakkār*). It is what made them activists. And when they encountered differences of opinion in their own collaborations, they often made the same choice—to part ways rather than compromise.

But Adarsh, who so often chooses compromise, faced a different sort of challenge—inconsistency—and this was also common among other activists I met. They all compromised somehow. Even Hari, living at home, had to adjust somewhat to the ways of his family. He ate food that was not what he considered "natural." I remember, the morning after our interview, he offered me a cup of tea. I declined and, a moment later, I saw him scolding his young nephew for drinking the cup that would have been mine. His nephew only laughed. Hari also had to find ways of living in common. Others owned houses or cars that they did not think were good, or ate

in air-conditioned restaurants, or smoked corporate cigarettes. This sometimes produced talk about hypocrisy, of course, just as some accused Adarsh of being a hypocrite for agreeing to publish an article against tea drinking. But as suggested earlier, even community among activists required that such demands for consistency not be carried too far.

The specific approach to social change undertaken by many Malayali environmental activists, because it is situated at the intersection of South Asian understandings of personhood and global ethical consumption movements, makes dilemmas between consistency and compromise especially frequent and intensely felt. However, we can also imagine how anyone seeking to bring about social change would face such dilemmas. We can find this dilemma, for example, in the contrast between different American community organizing traditions' approaches to ideology. In the Alinskyite and "consensus" approaches to organizing, the recognition that ideology can be divisive motivates an emphasis on working together first, shared values and beliefs later (Alinsky, 1971; Eichler, 1995; Miller, 2015). The organizer is still expected to be motivated by a vision for progressive social change, but does not insist that every step of this process be consistent with this vision, focusing instead on identifying shared interests (Beck & Eichler, 2000; Pruger & Specht, 1969). In feminist organizing, by contrast, ideology is taken to be the defining feature of the approach to organizing, integral to every step of the process (Bradshaw et al., 1994; Hyde, 1996). In each of these approaches, just as in Hari's and Adarsh's differing approaches to living out their beliefs, there is something to be lost and something to be gained. The activist who brackets ideology maximizes her ability to build community with a wide range of others, but may find that her organizing efforts do not produce

results that are, in the long run, consistent with her beliefs.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the activist who foregrounds ideology risks alienating potential allies and, to the degree that her ideology is radical, may limit her range of potential influence.⁵⁸

Moreover, as in the case of Hari and Salim's farming commune, the effects of living consistently with one's views can threaten relations *between* those working for change, even when they ostensibly share a social justice agenda. In closing this chapter, I draw a connection to a very different context: radicalism among social workers in the US. Reisch and Andrews (2001) trace a tradition of radicalism within twentieth-century American social work that includes such organizations as the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, the Radical Alliance of Social Service Workers, the National Welfare Rights Organization, and the Rank and File Movement. In introducing their study, the authors quote the National Association of Social Worker's (NASW) *Code of Ethics* and point out that the explicitly stated values in the *Code* seem to define "a radical vision for the profession" (2001, p. 2). And yet, the story they tell is one of generations of marginalization, of social workers who find themselves "out of place" within their own profession, both because of their views and because of the ways they enact those views.

⁵⁷ For example, Alinsky grew frustrated in later years with the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council's use of their coalition to resist racial integration (Connolly, 1976). As regards consensus organizing, its proponents have acknowledged that this method's ability to further a progressive agenda remains an open question (Beck & Eichler, 2000).

⁵⁸ An interesting counter example, which I do not have room to discuss in detail here, is Gandhi. Gandhi took radical positions on aspects of everyday life similar to those taken by Hari and Adarsh, and he arguably followed through more completely than either of them. In one sense, we can see how his dress, dietary habits, and sexual practices, for example, made him strange to others and "out of place." And yet, this strangeness was also what made him a powerful leader, revered as a sort of organizer-saint (Fox, 1989). Certainly, Gandhi is not the only such example; one can identify versions of such "saintly" leaders of social change in contemporary India and elsewhere. In future research, it may be worth looking more closely at such examples of "moral exemplars" who are revered in part because of the consistency with which they live out their unusually radical views. What makes the difference between a Hari, as described here, and a Gandhi?

Presenting the results of a survey of contemporary heirs to this radical social work tradition, Reisch and Andrews state:

Much like their professional ancestors, today's radical social workers consider themselves marginalized by colleagues and believe that they are often considered troublemakers because of their political views and activities. One respondent commented, "Many of [my colleagues] see me as...abrasive and I know that they would prefer I keep my mouth shut...so I tend to be on the fringe." Another spoke of being "socially shunned" (2001, p. 224).

Reisch and Andrews recount experiences that share much with Hari's description of struggling to make action consistent with beliefs, of being criticized and laughed at, and of gradually finding oneself isolated without, as Hari put it, any "space...to speak" (2001, pp. 213, 224). Like Hari, one social worker described how his "philosophy has hardened more and more" as he has experienced increasing marginalization in the profession (2001, p. 221). Others responded in ways more akin to the compromises made by Adarsh, acting "as a radical" only outside of the social work profession, or self-censoring in their conversations, teaching, or publications (2001, pp. 220, 223). Reisch and Andrews argue that a tension between enacting radical views and participating in the broader social work community characterizes not only the personal experiences of radical social workers, but also the tradition as a whole, particularly in its engagement with the professionalization of American social work. On the one hand, the authors acknowledge that many social work radicals see radicalism and professionalism as fundamentally incompatible (2001, pp. 233-234). On the other hand, they question whether the radical tradition can survive or be effective if entirely cut off from mainstream organizations and institutions (2001, p. 234). As for Hari and Adarsh, it is in no way obvious which choice would do more to further radical social workers' efforts for social change.

Such dilemmas are not only faced by self-described radicals, however, whether in the US or India. Reisch and Andrews argue that "the test of social work's commitment to its underlying values lies in the willingness to struggle on an often mundane, day-to-day basis to translate values into deeds" (2001, p. 231). To the extent that social workers attempt to undertake such everyday struggles for social change, they will face dilemmas between consistency and compromise—because to attempt to make the world better is, inevitably, to take evaluative positions that make one out of place in the world as it is. Seen from the vantage point of calls for social justice or the prescriptions of codes of ethics, the solution to such dilemmas may seem obvious: following through on one's values is, by definition, the only ethically justifiable option. In this chapter, however, I have examined such dilemmas as deeply felt problems that pervade everyday life. From this vantage point, I wish to suggest, the solution is less clear. First, because social relations may have value in and of themselves. But additionally, because the very work of bringing about change must be undertaken in and through one's relationships. A person who compromises too much will not make a difference, but neither will an isolated person. Thus, those who set out to transform their social worlds must remain participants in those worlds while also setting themselves apart.

In this chapter, we have explored how the efforts of activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* to enact radically alternative ethical values can cause rifts in their relationships. Together with the previous chapter, this chapter demonstrates how accountability to oneself and accountability to others are often closely affiliated, one blurring into the other. It is by exploiting this relationship that creative projects of changing oneself become persuasive projects of changing others, and vice versa. In the next chapter, we will continue to explore the power of stance alignment, in particular, to drive ethical creativity and persuasion. But we will also put this force

into question. We will look beyond stance-taking as a relation between subjects and inquire into the moral powers of evaluated objects. Examining the moral realist underpinnings of evidentiary practices in the Gandhamur campaign, we will ask what force, if any, the sights and smells of pollution can exert on the ethical commitments of activists and the sympathies of those to whom they appeal.

Chapter 7: The Smell of Injustice

7.1 Evidence, evidence everywhere

Sometime in the night, the effluent pipe from the gelatin factory broke, and by late morning, the paddy field was completely flooded. The Action Council mobilized. Peters, an accountant and local civic luminary who was active in the campaign against the factory, stood knee-deep in the muck for several hours while a small forest of flags grew up around him, each bearing the insignia of a different political party. By noon, Peters began to pass out and had to be carried away, but this seemed only to lift the protestors' spirits higher. Journalists came and went, trying to capture the smelly blackness in the water with their video cameras, and in the afternoon, at last, the district collector⁵⁹ arrived. As she stepped out of her little white car, the Action Council converged, with several prominent women in the lead. They took her from site to site, along the edge of the field, and down the canal to the river. The collector said very little, but nodded, smiled, and looked very concerned. Then, when she had seen all and was about to get back into her car, a reporter pointed a camera in her face and demanded some statement about what she had just seen.

"In a layman's way, I can say the problem is very clearly that there is pollution. The

⁵⁹ A district collector is a government official in charge of revenue collection and administration of a district (a subdivision of states, comparable to a county in the US). As officers of the Indian Administrative Service, collectors have a certain degree of autonomy from electoral politics. A collector has the power to issue "stop work" orders for businesses operating within the district under her charge.

government has to decide whether they want a technical report and what must be done."

And with that, she slipped back into her car and left.

Activists in the campaign against the gelatin factory in Gandhamur often found themselves in the paradoxical position of being inundated with evidence and having no evidence at all. They lived their lives immersed in pollution; they smelled it in the air, saw it floating in the river or the paddy field, and tasted it in their drinking water. But they struggled to produce the "technical" forms of evidence demanded by government officials or the courts. Campaign participants and supporters might be moved by smells, sights, or tastes, but the state would only act on science.

For the Gandhamur Action Council, producing evidence of pollution was as much an ethical problem as a problem of fact. Pollution, of course, is an inherently moral concept ; to say that something is polluted is to say that it is not as it ought to be. In the controversy over the gelatin factory, evidence of pollution was never simply about discovering what was there, but always also about what ought to be done. For Action Council participants evidence of pollution was evidence of injustice. Thus, as an ethical problem, evidence was important in more than one way. It was a strategic problem, a matter of how to persuade others to join the cause. But it was also an existential problem; if there was no injustice there, there was no cause to join at all. Thus, the Action Council's difficulties with scientific evidence were, potentially, as much a problem for morale within the campaign as for the success of its appeals to government officials or the broader public.

Many protest movements and activist campaigns seek to produce evidence to some extent. If we accept Charles Tilly and Tarrow's (2007) definition of contentious politics as actors making claims bearing on the interests of others, then it is not hard to see how those who pursue

contentious politics would sometimes need to provide warrant for their claims. What distinguishes environmental organizing, however, is the importance of evidence from the physical sciences as backing for claims of injustice. As Tesh notes, "although citizens who organize against environmental pollution do use moral concepts, their claims have a scientific base" (2000, p. 9). Although Tesh (2000) documents several US environmental campaigns that were successful despite a lack of scientific evidence, she shows that environmental science was important to activists' understandings of environmental hazards and their motivations for organizing. In other words, even where environmental activists do not make strategic use of scientific evidence, it remains existentially crucial. Making claims in environmental politics is inseparable from making scientific facts.

And yet, by the time they took the district collector down to the edge of the paddy, the Gandhamur Action Council had had enough of science. For many months its official position had been that no more studies were needed, and opposition to scientific research had become even more strident after the release of a recent government report by a panel of independent experts. Although the report had found elevated levels of some heavy metals, it had described the results as inconclusive and called for further study. Further study: Vijayan, the leader of the Action Council, often told me that this was all scientific studies had ever or would ever achieve. Members of the Action Council heard the collector's words as confirmation of this sentiment. Although many held her in high regard, they were deeply frustrated. If the collector had seen the pollution with her own eyes and told the TV reporters it was real, then why was yet another technical report necessary? The mood by the edge of the paddy turned glum.

Struggles over claims about the reality of injustices are usually analyzed in terms of competing efforts to impose human notions of justice and injustice onto a value-neutral reality.

In social movement studies, for example, organizations are described as strategically "framing" real situations or events in ethically charged ways that serve their aims (see Chapter 3). In such accounts, the values belong to the activists, not to the world. But this approach to ethics is not unique to studies of contentious claim making. In anthropology, at least, human values are generally described as springing from social practices of evaluation in which the objects of evaluation have a bit role at best. The metaphor of stance, which I discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, captures this view of the ontology of ethical values well. Ethical value is a matter of how people position themselves in relation to things, not a matter of the intrinsic qualities of things. Humans give values to reality; they do not draw them from reality.

In recent years, the idea that ethical values are of more-than-human making has had a growing number of proponents in philosophy and sociology (Philip S Gorski, 2013; Sayer, 2011; C. Smith, 2015). Anthropologists have by and large remained suspicious of these trends (Fiske & Mason, 1990; Shweder & Menon, 2014). And they have good reason to be. Anthropologists have often been in the position of countering the claims of scholars in other disciplines that, to borrow Hume's (2000) terms, knowledge of what "is" makes them authorities on what "ought" to be. Anthropology's recent post-Kantian concern with ontology—i.e, with the "is"—has had little if any effect on the discipline's apprehension about moves from is to ought. Anthropologists have long argued that facts are value-laden, and some have begun to speak of realities as value-laden as well (Mol, 2002), which would seem to re-open the question of the place of realities in ethical life. But a simultaneous surge in research and theory about ethics has engaged little with all of the talk of reality and realities.⁶⁰ Moral realism would seem to have a prime location at the

⁶⁰ An important exception are Shweder and Menon (2014), who point out that most humans conceptualize values as objectively knowable. The authors argue that this fact should challenge

intersection of these two literatures but, perhaps because of its fraught history, it has remained relatively unexamined.

From one angle, the predicament of the Gandhamur Action Council illustrates anthropologists' concerns with moral realism perfectly: their moral claims go unanswered because government experts, being the authorities on what is in the water, are also the arbiters of what should be done. And yet, the Action Council and its supporters, even if they refuted the need for further scientific studies, did not give up on links between the is and the ought. On the contrary, taking the collector to the edge of the paddy, calling TV reporters, setting flags in the muck and lining up chairs on the side of the road—it was all about contention over moral reality. For these and many other environmental organizers, the best road to ought lies through evidence.

Activist uses of evidence should provoke us to consider moral realism more seriously, if from a somewhat novel angle. Activist evidence is always evidence for a cause, and in that sense it fits with existing metaphors of value as a "stance" or "frame"—that is, an action upon the world. This aspect of activist evidence poses a challenge to the propensity of some recent treatments of ontology to treat claims about reality as self-sufficient and non-contentious (Graeber, 2015). Nonetheless, activist evidence also presumes that reality is already value-laden, and that what is at stake is not only how humans evaluate reality but what actually exists. Contention over the presence of pollution in Gandhamur, then, is an ethical problem that is also a problem for our theories of ethics. By analyzing the evidentiary practices through which Action Council participants attempted to demonstrate the reality of pollution in Gandhamur, we can explore the varieties of relation between is and ought and reopen the question of moral realism

anthropologist to take moral realism more seriously, and warn of unintended political implications of assuming a relativist viewpoint.

for the anthropology of ethics.

7.2 The smell of injustice

When I arrived in Kerala for dissertation fieldwork in 2013, I was warned not to go to Gandhamur. Just when I had settled with my daughter in the nearby town of Chalakudy and was ready to make my first field visit, police charged a group of protesters in front of the gelatin factory and beat them with heavy sticks. This event stimulated new organizing efforts, making Gandhamur an even more attractive research site. However, in the first few days after the violence, friends told me that visiting there would likely get me deported and maybe worse. It was hard to wait. Pained by the thought of all I might be missing, I gave my research assistant, Sunil, a little basic training on how to take field notes, outfitted him with my audio recorder and camera, and sent him to find out what he could.

But when Sunil returned that evening, it was not the photos, recordings, or field notes he brought back that interested me; something had changed about Sunil himself.

"Have you become one of the campaign activists?" I asked, grinning.

When Sunil and I had talked about the gelatin factory campaign before, he had always been cautious, if not skeptical. He had told me that he did not plan to take sides. But now, after only a few hours in the village, he was ready to admit that he was no longer neutral. He was certain that the protesters claims were true, and he felt he also should join the campaign. How, I asked, had this change happened?

"They all told me 'there is so much pollution in the water,' and I heard them." Sunil explained, "But when I saw it directly, then it was really true. Because in the water there was this smell...A smell was there, and there was the color change of that...so it must've been when I saw all of that."

Sunil and I would reflect back on his first visit to Gandhamur, and its effect on him, for many months to come. Each of us would be taken to the edge of the water many more times, and we would watch others, like the district collector, be taken there as well to see and smell the pollution. Indeed, in the months following the police violence, much of the activity of the campaign was organized around such guided tours for outside visitors, which occurred several times per day. We watched them lead students, religious leaders, and government officials to the same spots. We heard the same arguments about acid, asthma, and cancer rates. The same story of a wedding reception that had been canceled due to the bad smell. Watching local activists show visitors the pollution again and again, I became more aware of the showing, and of what the activists said, and less attentive to the stuff in the water and the smell in the air. Over time, I began to see direct encounters as a powerful ritual capable of transforming other visitors just as it had transformed Sunil.

Making the pollution obvious was never about allowing it to speak for itself. In my video recording from the collector's visit, for example, the local activists surround the collector as soon as she steps out of her car. There are always multiple voices speaking at once, and many parts of the audio track are difficult to transcribe. What I can make out is full of deictics:

"This is the water that we have to drink! We should make them drink this!

"This is my riverbank. I am living right next to the river...The riverbank next to my house is like this."

"This soil cannot be used ever again! This soil is destroyed. This area is destroyed."

With such words, the activists directed the collector's attention to aspects of what lay around her. As they pointed with their words, they also pointed with their hands. They leaned forward to insert themselves into her visual field. Moreover, they tied what she saw to aspects of

their experience that she could not see—to drinking the water, to living beside the river, to farming the soil.

Like Sunil, the collector and others described seeing and smelling the pollution in this way as *nēriṭṭ*, glossed above as "directly," an adverb derived from the Malayalam for "straight." A popular Malayalam-English dictionary lists the glosses of *nēriṭṭ* as "directly, in person, without mediators" ("Nēriṭṭ," 2012). Local activists often used this term to describe their own experiences with pollution, particularly the experiences that had led them to join the campaign (see Chapter 2). Given the importance of direct experience with pollution in local organizers' own motivations, it is not surprising that they sought to enroll others by taking them to experience the pollution directly as well.

Though the rhetoric of directness focuses on a relation between an experiencing subject and pollution, directness should also be understood as a relation between subjects. When locals guide the collector's attention to the stuff in the water or a house on the far side of the paddy, they construct what Schutz' called a "we" relationship—a shared, intersubjective orientation to the world. As Schutz argues, a "we" relationship is not only a way of knowing some third object, but a way of knowing one another. Schutz describes this relationship using a metaphor of two people beside each other watching a bird in flight. They not only orient to the bird, they also orient to one another via the bird. Both people may not experience an object (e.g. bird) in the world in the same way, but they nonetheless share a togetherness in their coordinated experiences of objects.

Such intersubjective coordination points to one way of theorizing the role of reality in ethics. Keane, building on the work of Garfinkel, has argued that ethical judgement depends upon the construction of intersubjective agreement about "what is going on and, given that, what

the appropriate way to act is" (Keane, 2016, pp. 89, 90). Under the conceptualization of reality as intersubjective agreement, ethical value is still imposed by humans upon the world, but "the world" is itself a product of human interaction. Thus, what Keane calls "shared reality" not only includes descriptions of what is, but also prescriptions for what ought to be done. When the locals in Gandhamur showed Sunil the pollution, for example, we might say he had a direct encounter not only with pollution, but also with injustice. The metaphor of stance works well with this way of talking about moral reality. If Sunil's encounter with injustice was enacted through an ethical alignment with Action Council participants, his encounter with pollution might be called an ontic alignment.

One advantage of the notion of reality as intersubjective coordination is that it renders the "is/ought" problem unproblematic. To the extent that reality is already fundamentally social, it is also already replete with human values. In other words, everything that is has already been relocated into the world of human oughts, so is and ought no longer require any bridging. One could argue, then, that this conception of reality, which is popular in anthropology, already includes a kind of moral realism. But this moral realism only applies insofar as reality is understood to be constructed intersubjectively.⁶¹

As the ritual of direct encounter makes apparent, the intersubjective coordination required for sustaining a shared moral reality can take a lot of work (Keane, 2016, p. 91). In Schutz' example, coordination might seem to arise spontaneously from the mere co-presence of

⁶¹ Keane's discussion of shared reality, for example, is specifically concerned with the background assumptions required for social interaction and, by extension, evaluation in interaction. At the same time, his discussion of natural histories and affordances employs a notion of reality that is not limited to intersubjectivity. Thus, while his analysis might be called realist with regard to shared reality, this does not imply moral realism with regard to the objective world.

people and birds, but the Action Council members did not have it so easy. Pointing with both their hands and their words, they had to guide the collector in following the flow of the pollution from the factory into the paddy field and beyond, into a river that could not be seen from where they stood. And the work of coordination did not stop there. With their stories of stinky wells and late night coughing, of skin rashes and cancer, they guided her in tracking the movement of the pollution through their lives.

Direct encounters, in other words, were intensely mediated. Mazzarella (2006) has warned that activists' claims of direct access to reality—what he calls the "politics of immediation"—are dangerous because they hide the work of mediation. Such erasures are apparent in the contrast between the rhetoric of direct encounters with pollution and the highly mediated direct encounter ritual. But to reject immediation claims as bad politics on these grounds alone would miss the point. Because what is at stake in claims to directness, at least in this case, is not so much that pointing, commenting, and other kinds of mediation are not involved. What is important is that these are not everything. When Sunil describes his direct encounter with the pollution, he begins by saying that the local activists had already told him about it. So he did not happen upon the pollution alone. The locals prepared him and guided him there. But what really convinced him to join their cause, he claimed, was what they guided him to. The smell of it. The color. Sunil said that these had an effect that was greater than, and therefore not reducible to, the agency of the local activists. Reality, he claimed, persuaded him.

To what extent are the claims of Sunil and others to direct encounters with pollution (i.e. with injustice) compatible with the conceptualizations of "shared realities" above? The answer may depend upon how much emphasis is placed upon sharing and how much is placed upon reality. Sunil's direct encounter with pollution is undoubtedly conditioned and mediated by social

interaction with local activists. But it also adds something. The smell and the color become a condition for a new social coordination; they bring about a new alignment between Sunil and the activists. And Sunil claims that this effect was only possible insofar as the smell and the color were not themselves reducible to local activists' prior attempts at coordination. This claim seems to align closely with Schutz' account of the "we" relationship, in which the flying bird is a condition for social coordination. Attention to the bird may be mediated by a pointing finger or even the movement of an eye, but the relation between watchers is also mediated by the bird. For both Sunil and Schutz then, even if social coordination is always a precondition for shared realities, reality is not reducible to sharing. On the contrary, reality is also a precondition for social coordination.

An important difference between Sunil's and Schutz' concerns, however, is that Sunil has seen and smelled a moral object whereas Schutz' birdwatchers only watched a bird. Schutz describes the birdwatchers as sharing space and time, but direct encounters were intended to be productive of a shared ethics as well. Implicit in Sunil's description of his encounter with the pollution, then, is a theory that values, and not only neutral objects, are not reducible to social coordination. To return to the metaphor of stance once again, Sunil's ethical position with respect to the campaign was not merely an effect of his interaction with Gandhamur activists. The reality that he encountered was, in some sense, already positioned for him. Here, talk of stancetaking comes up against a limit because it can describe subject positions and alignment of subject positions with respect to objects, but the objects themselves (regardless of whether they are human or non-human) have no agency in the matter. And yet, the possibility of direct encounters with pollution requires that objects can have ethical effects on subjects. To come face-to-face with injustice is not only to access the world as it is, but also to recognize with certainty what

ought (or ought not) to be.

Although Sunil's did not describe his own direct encounter this way, our other observations of the direct encounter ritual suggested that empathetic engagement was crucial to making directness a matter of ethical, and not only ontic, alignment. Local organizers did not only direct the collector's attention to the polluted water, but to the "water that we have to drink." Likewise, when they tied objects in the shared sensory field to stories of a child's sickness or a smell strong enough to wake them in the night, they took shared sights and smells as an infrastructure for building a shared experience of injustice. But if Sunil's account of his first direct encounter exemplifies a move from smelling the pollution to empathizing with the struggle, much other talk of pollution in Gandhamur seemed to make the opposite move. Stories of suffering were appeals for empathy, and the recognition of the smell in the air as pollution was undergirded by this emotional and moral alignment.

In direct encounters, then, we can we see one way that activists bridge the "is" and the "ought." But it is a two-way bridge. Sunil arrived at commitment to the cause by way of smells and colors, but Gandhamur activists were not shy about getting to the smell by means of commitment to the cause. The latter move—from "ought" to "is"—was diffusely evident in the whole mood and tenor of the protest by the rice paddy on the day the collector came. Mingling and chatting in the road that ran between the paddy and the factory wall, protestors complained of headaches and difficulty breathing. They told jokes with nose between thumb and forefinger and shouted up at the factory workers' peering over the wall. And they went back again and again to point out the nastiness to visitors and to each other. There was a collective elation, it seemed, in the sudden obviousness of the pollution. The complaints, the jokes, and the pointing all made the pollution more obvious, and the obviousness was fodder for more commentary, more

pointing. One might say that a vicious (or virtuous) cycle was set up between sharing and reality, such that pollution was directly experienced and outrage shared by all. In this festive convergence of fact and value, injustice was felt to be undeniable.

7.3 “That’s what you say”

The collector's direct encounter with the pollution may not have persuaded her to do what Gandhamur organizers wanted, but she did take action, and quickly. Late that afternoon, a second little white car arrived, carrying a scientist from the Kerala Pollution Control Board and a trunkload of plastic jugs. She did not receive the same welcome the collector had. At least one man shouted at her to leave. But Salil, the unofficial slogan leader for the Action Council, led her down to the water's edge. While he waded into the muck with one of the jugs, other men gathered around. It was getting close to dinnertime now, and the women were at home. As the researcher began to make notes in her clipboard, Stevenson, the owner of a nearby brick and roof tile factory, edged his way in beside her.

"This goes from the paddy into the canal, doesn't it?" she asked.

"From the paddy into the perunthodu canal. This is a tributary..."

They went back and forth, indicating directions with their hands as Stevenson described the path that the blackish water would take to get to the river. While she wrote in her pad, he leaned closer and softly asked her to understand that no one had anything against her personally. It was just that they had been bearing all of this for so long. For a moment, she turned and looked him in the eye.

"I'm not saying that, but shouldn't people speak with some manners? Someone said 'I'll hit you !'"

"Hey! There was nothing like that...someone said that?"

"That's what [he] said," the researcher confirmed, turning her attention back to her notepad, "And I know who said it too."

But before Stevenson could say more, some of the other men standing behind her interjected. They spoke up all at once, raising their voices to talk over one another.

"No! Madam! That's the disgust of the people! They're saying that because they have not been able to get justice for 5 ½ years. There's no point in blaming them."

"Why test this when you can see it with your bare eyes?!"

"It's right there...even a child would understand."

The KPCB researcher stiffened and stared silently at the black and foamy water. Stevenson tried to speak over the others, leaning closer and describing how the people here lie awake in bed at night, unable to breathe, but now the researcher gave him no response. Finally, cutting him off, she asked, "This was emitted the day before yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"The twenty first, right?"

"Yes."

She noted it down in her pad. Behind her, the others crowded closer and louder. Stevenson bent closer as well, leaning out over the water to get into her field of vision. She did not look up.

"Let me just say one simple thing...wasn't it in Njeetorey [a village downstream] that the fish died?"

"Since when has this been floating up to the surface?" she asked, "Since morning?"

"Night," he said.

...

In some ways the process of taking samples would seem to offer an ideal opportunity for facilitating a direct encounter with the pollution. The researcher needed to establish spatiotemporal co-orientation with the Action Council members in order to take samples, and Stevenson astutely perceived this as an opportunity for ethical co-orientation as well. But unlike the collector, the researcher refused every attempt to embed aspects of the sensory surround in narratives about locals' experiences of suffering. When Stevenson mentioned how breathing problems keep local residents up at night, for example, she did not respond. Her next utterance, a question about when the effluent was emitted, again established a co-orientation to the stuff in the water, but not to breathing problems. She sought to co-orient to a shared reality, but she was selective about what aspects of reality she would share.

Like Stevenson, others soon came forward to share stories about health problems, especially those of their children, with the KPCB researcher. And for the most part, she responded as she had to Stevenson: staying focused on her notepad and restricting her utterances to questions about the stuff she was sampling. Only as she was getting back into her car, did the men finally seem to break through. Stevenson had just finished describing his own child's breathing ailment, and Rajesh asked her where she lived. She murmured something very softly.

"You have children, don't you?" asked Rajesh.

She affirmed with a slight twitch of her head, her hand on the car door handle.

"We're telling you this because *we* have children," he said.

"Madame, one minute," began an older man who, until now, has been standing quietly behind the others, "After six chemotherapy treatments, my wife is finally sort of healthy...My brother's house is just opposite, just across this [he points to the paddy field]. This smell, these are things that we are really experiencing."

"Aren't you standing with all of that?" Rajesh demanded, "For this company?"

"That's what you say, isn't it?" The researcher asked, her tone implying that the question needed no answer.

"What?"

"That's what you say, isn't it?" she said again, laughing as she climbed into the car.

The researcher's question, "That's what you say, isn't it?" foregrounds her denial of co-orientation to a shared reality. By framing the position of Rajesh and others⁶² as "what you say," the researcher marks her non-alignment with that position while also not explicitly disagreeing. The stories the campaign participants tell are their stories, not hers. More importantly, in focusing on the campaign participants' words as "what you say," the researcher undermines any possibility of direct encounter with the injustices that the local activists claim are real. The campaign participants, she insists, are mediators, and further appeals to her will only be recognized as more mediation. What they say must remain only what they say.

By focusing on the campaign participants as mediators, the KPCB researcher not only refused to treat their experiences as immediate, but also refused an immediacy of relationship with them. Schutz notes that, "the greater my awareness of the we-relationship, the less is my involvement in it, and the less am I genuinely related to my partner. The more I reflect, the more my partner becomes transformed into a mere object of thought" (167). By recognizing their appeals only as "what you say," the researcher fixed them as objects of observation, rather than as participants in a shared subjectivity. In this way, she foreclosed the empathetic engagement

⁶² In the video, it is not clear whether the researcher's question is addressed only to Rajesh or to the whole group. But insofar as Rajesh was attempting a kind of summary point – a rhetorical capstone demanding a response to all that he and the others had been telling her-- it makes sense to hear the researcher as characterizing the campaign participants' words in general.

that might otherwise have led her to join their cause. It was as if she looked where Stevenson pointed in order to take her samples, but when he described their experiences of suffering, she attended only to his pointing finger, as it were. Thus, on the same bit of road that was bubbling over with the obviousness of pollution a few hours before, the cycle between sharing and reality was rendered inert—cut short before it had a chance to gather any momentum.

The Action Council members' interaction with the KPCB researcher helps to clarify why "direct" evidence was so important to them. If the activists' claims about injustice are only "what they say," then they lose their persuasive force for the researcher and, by extension, for the government. Directness was important to Sunil because it affected him in ways that the activists' words did not. But for the KPCB official, the pollution will be recognized to exist *only* if it affects her in ways that are not reducible to what the activists say. In contrast to Mazzarella's warning that claims of unmediated access to reality can be dangerous, the Gandhamur activists faced a more urgent danger in the contention that their claims about reality were only mediations.

One way to hear the KPCB researcher's response to activists is as an assertion that all claims about injustice are simply a matter of what people say. Her rejection of their experiences as valid, then, might be grounded in an ideology about who can authoritatively produce evidence. This interpretation would be consistent with my interactions with other KPCB officials. Late in my research, I was fortunate to make acquaintance with a friend of the chairman of the agency, and I arranged for an interview with him at their headquarters. However, when I arrived in his office, the chairman declined to answer any of my questions. He told me politely that the agency was responsible for studying pollution in Kerala and that they do their job well. Thus, he held, there was no reason for them to explain how they do it to anyone else. He said that

whatever information they provided for the public was already available on their website.⁶³ In other words, the chairman asserted a straightforward division of labor in which the KPCB gathers evidence and distributes it to the government and, to some extent, the public. If the KPCB researcher dismissed the Gandhamur activists' evidentiary practices as "what you say," the chairman seemed accustomed to defining valid evidence as "what we say."

Nonetheless, government researchers were not the only scientists who considered the Action Council's evidentiary practices less than adequate. Some scientists who were supporters of the campaign also considered empathetic co-orientation with campaign participants to be an illegitimate mediation of reality. For example, Asha was a prominent environmentalist scientist who had long supported the campaign. Nonetheless, she said that she could not lend her voice to the campaign's call to close down the factory completely. She could not fault campaign participants for demanding this, but such a demand was grounded in "emotion" (*vikāram*) and she was "a person that believes in facing all of the issues with facts and figures." She attributed action based on emotion to the people. Given "the people's" experience of the pollution in Gandhamur, she said, such intensity of emotion had arisen inevitably and spontaneously. But even though she shared their concerns, and validated their experiences, she declined to join them in acting based on emotion. She asserted that environmental activists simply do not have the kind of emotions (*vikāram*) that the people have.

The term *vikāram* was frequently used to describe local activists in Gandhamur. Though I have glossed it above as "emotion," the term is generally used to denote only a subset of emotions—anger, sadness, or lust, but not happiness or love. Often, it is used to describe some

⁶³ I searched the website extensively for reports on Gandhamur and could find none. I was later informed by my informants that they could only be obtained through a request filed under India's Right to Information Act.

combination of emotions, particularly when the effect is overwhelming. *Vikāram* is intense emotion that can drive a person to act in ways that they would not when level-headed. Local activists often described their *vikāram* with pride, calling it the source of the campaign's strength and tenacity. They also used the term to describe themselves at times when they seemed to anticipate that I might object to their actions; for example, when they became openly hostile with factory workers or journalists. When Rajesh sought to convince the KPCB researcher that she should not blame the locals for threatening her, he said it was because of their *vikāram* that "the people" say such things.

Rajesh's use of *vikāram* to legitimate action implicitly invokes something like Asha's theory of spontaneous emotion arising from local experiences of pollution. Both Rajesh and Asha describe *vikāram* as moving "the people" (*janāññal*) to act, such that in some sense their actions are not their own. Here again, we have an assertion of immediacy: the injustice of the pollution stirs up the *vikāram* of the people, driving them to rise up in protest. Their actions cannot be evaluated in the usual ways because they are the outcome of injustice itself, rather than human reflection and agency.

Analyzing similar claims about spontaneity in the American civil rights movement, Poletta (2006) has argued that denials of agency by social movement actors can encourage participation and heighten morale. The rhetoric of *vikāram* points to one possible reason for this seemingly counterintuitive finding. Under this interpretation, the actions of the protesters are taken to be an effect of the justice of their cause. The less reflective or strategic the actions, the more they point back to the reality of the pollution that drives them. The actions of the people are justified by the reality from which they spontaneously arise, and the existence of that reality is certified by the rage of the people.

Note, however, that Asha asserts that she cannot participate in this spontaneity because only the people have *vikāram*. Elsewhere, I have noted that the term "activists" (*pravarttakar*) is one defining contrast for such usages of "the people" (see Chapter 2). Asha notes that distinction and suggests that scientists, who deal in facts and figures, are excluded from the people as well. But even as a scientist and an activist, who cannot accept claims about reality based on emotion, Asha still concedes that the people have a kind of unmediated access to moral reality. She recognizes their demand to shut down the factory as valid *for them* because it is the injustice of their circumstances that motivates the demand. Thus, she implicitly recognizes that injustice is really there. But she also holds that, with regard to her own position as scientist and environmental activist, she cannot conclude that injustice is there.⁶⁴

One way to understand Asha's seemingly contradictory claims is through Mol's concept of distribution (2002). For Mol and some other proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology, reality is not so much a state of being as an activity; people do not discover or know reality, they do reality (Law, 2009; Mol, 2002, pp. 5,6). Mol argues that one consequence of this processual view is that realities are multiple and varied. Different ways of doing reality (e.g., what we have here called "evidentiary practices") bring different realities into being. In the view of ontology theorists, such different and potentially conflicting realities need not be subsumable within any encompassing ontology. Instead, they can be distributed across different settings, roles, or aims of evidentiary practices. Thus, Asha can do reality as scientist and activist even as she recognizes that Gandhamur activists do reality differently. She may even concede

⁶⁴ This is not to say that Asha did not see any injustice in the Gandhamur situation. But the injustice she saw was not sufficient, she believed, to justify the claims the local activists were making. She argued that the situation justified that they make these claims, but did not justify the claims themselves.

that their reality is relevant to her in some ways so long as she distributes these two realities to separate questions or aspects of her work. We can see a similar act of distribution when the district collector asserts that, "in a layman's way," she is certain that pollution is there, while also maintaining that any government decisions would need to be based on a technical report.

The notion of reality as an activity agrees in some ways with the conceptions of shared reality examined above. Both ontologies (or infra-ontologies, as ontological turn folks might have it) conceptualize reality as, at least in part, produced within and internal to certain social interactions. Schutz' conception of the "we" relationship, however, also presupposes that realities are external to and productive of social interactions. For Mol and other multiple ontology theorists, social interactions include both humans and nonhumans, but the realities that they enact are wholly internal to the enactment.

This has important implications for the activist uses of evidence described here. If all realities are internal to enactments, then there is no way to claim that any evidentiary practice more directly accesses reality than any other. Every practice, one might say, has direct access to its own reality. Mol describes the consequences for moral claims concisely: "Bodies enacted are being done, which means they cannot answer the question of *what to do*" (2002, pp. 164-165, italics in original). If every encounter is a direct encounter, then realities have nothing to say about oughts. Gandhamur activists' encounters with injustice are only "what you say."

For Gandhamur activists, the problem with the distribution of multiple realities is not simply that it vitiates their claims to directness, but that holding realities separate does not entail making them equal. On the contrary, for both Asha and the district collector, there is the implication that, when it comes to action, one reality must be more equal than the others. Asha's acceptance of multiple realities grounds her acceptance of local activists' intense emotions and

leads her to validate their conviction that the factory should be shut down. But she will not seek to shut down the factory herself. For that, facts and figures are needed. Likewise, by acknowledging the reality of the pollution "in a layman's way," the collector forestalls any question of government action. For both, their acceptance of some validity of what we might call "the people's reality" is couched in the assertion that this is not the reality that matters for their own actions.

In short, theories of multiple realities offer no more for the activists in Gandhamur than theories of reality as sharing. For them, it matters that reality is shared not only with other activists, but with anyone they might seek to persuade. Only then can they claim that the injustice they know is the injustice others must recognize. For these activists, then, the multiple realities talk of the "ontological turn" in anthropology misses the pragmatic meaning of reality entirely.⁶⁵

Gandhamur activists claims about directness are contentious; they invoke moral reality in an attempt to counter the moral claims of the factory, its workers, the police, and others. Reality is powerful because it can separate out "what x says" from something more. It can arbitrate between different moral claims. If reality is a social process, it is not a sort of enacting, but a sort of arguing. If reality, opinion, and perspective all mean the same thing, then the Gandhamur activists have no reason to talk about reality at all.

It is not hard to see why the Gandhamur Action Council came to oppose further scientific

⁶⁵ Keane (2013) has recently argued that statements about the nature of reality generally are better analyzed with regard to their ethical implications, rather than treated as descriptions of alternate ways of being. While this is my own approach to analysis here, it is worth noting that it might also serve as a description of the KPCB researcher's response to activists. In other words, while the stakes in their claims are ethical, the desired pragmatic effect of their claims hinges on their *not* being read only as ethical stances, but also as legitimate accounts of a moral reality.

research altogether. Science is hazardous because it may render their moral claims simply "what they say." Even if scientific evidence is understood to enact only one of many realities, it undermines the force of activists' own invocations of reality to compel an ought, arrogating such moves to facts, figures, and technical reports. For the same reason, however, we can see why Gandhamur activists would have difficulty abandoning science altogether. Insofar as the reality of the KPCB, expert panels, and technical reports is the reality that matters for government action, they had much to lose by disavowing engagement with the agency's researchers entirely. What they required was a way to make their reality recognizable to science.

7.4 People's Science

In her study of US environmental justice movements, Tesh (2000) describes environmentalists struggling with contradictions between people's experiences of injustice and the findings of scientists. She argues that these contradictions are rooted in fundamentally incompatible epistemologies. In Kerala, however, epistemological opposition between the people and science, while widely recognized, has not always been regarded as inevitable. From the early twentieth century, Kerala's Communist movement sought to ground its politics in absolute commitments to both the masses (*bahujanānaḷ*) and to science. In the 1960s, this Communist ethic produced the Kerala people's science movement (*Kēraḷa Śāstra Sāhitya Pariṣatt*, or KSSP), which sought to spread literacy, educate the masses in elementary scientific theories, and harness science in the service of the people (Isaac, Franke, & Parameswaran, 1997; Jaffry, Rangarajan, Ekbal, & Kannan, 1983). The people's science movement was by no means epistemologically relativist; scientific findings were taught to the people, not questioned in light of popular beliefs. But the notion that science should serve the people implied a certain division of labor; science supplied the means, but the purposes were to defend the interests of the people against

capitalism, corrupt governance, and other forms of injustice. Thus, KSSP popularized the notion that science could and should be on the people's side. By the time I arrived in Gandhamur, the booklets and scientific demonstrations of the KSSP were regarded as quaint remnants of a bygone era, but the possibility of people's science was still very much in the air.

As should be clear by now, the Gandhamur Action Council often invoked the ethico-epistemological authority of the people in making claims about injustice, and they did so with some success. But the campaign struggled to combine this authority with scientific evidence. Efforts to produce people's science were always underway, but the desired synthesis remained illusory. Part of the difficulty was lack of access to laboratories and expertise. Research produced in collaboration with students at a nearby social work school, for example, was dismissed for lack of rigor. On the other hand, there was also concern that an overly robust study might undermine the claims of the Action Council. At one point, a large panel of scientific experts from across Kerala was formed with the initial participation from both the factory owners and the campaign. According to its convener, this was a huge strategic opportunity for the campaign because he and nearly every member of the panel were strong supporters of the Action Council's cause. But the study never happened because the Action Council balked at the condition that it would have to accept whatever the panel found. Local leaders never doubted that the pollution was there, but they did doubt whether scientific research would confirm their views, even when the scientists appeared to be on their side. The problem was how to ensure that science would bolster, not undermine, the moral claims of the people.

The study that had come closest to achieving the people's science synthesis had been conducted by an NGO called *Jananīti* ("People's Justice"), which specialized in producing "investigative studies" on issues related to people's struggles. Campaign participants sometimes

argued that further research was not necessary because there was *already* an abundance of scientific evidence on their side, and the *Jananīti* study was the basis for this argument. The *Jananīti* study confirmed every aspect of the campaign's claims. Because it was published in the first years of the campaign, it is likely that its findings had influenced the framing of the claims as well. In particular, the study had found high levels of heavy metals in the water, and campaign participant's often described these metals as the reason for high levels of cancer and other illnesses in the village. Thus, this study had been adopted by the campaign, as it were, and its claims blended harmoniously into the voice of the people.

Unfortunately, beyond confirming the views of activists themselves, the *Jananīti* study had had little impact on the trajectory of the campaign. The reasons for this failure were a topic of some debate, but the most common view was that the study, though full of evidence, was unscientific. Critics within the campaign described the study's problem as an excess of *vikāram*, the term Asha used to distinguish activism from science. The study, they argued, was too closely and obviously aligned with the perspectives and emotions of campaign participants; it read like an activist report more than a scientific report. Although the study's critics did not dispute its findings, nor disagree with its sympathies, they believed the study was of limited strategic use because it was too obviously already on the side of the people.

James, the former Catholic priest who heads *Jananīti*, did not dispute that the report was sympathetic to the campaign. When I asked him about the impression among some that he had published "an activist report," he enthusiastically affirmed this view.

"You are absolutely right. An activist report is what it is. But, facts are there. You can't deny it. See, that means there is a kind of emotional involvement in that."

This emotional side of the report is apparent in the way that it presents evidence. In the

acknowledgements, for example, there is a dedication to "the PEOPLE OF GANDHAMUR who live at the other end of the pipeline to a total disaster, for their enduring resistance and persistent protests against a devastating industrial fiasco." The chapter presenting a "scientific analysis of samples" is preceded by a chapter describing the experiences of the *Jananīti* team who visited the site, which mixes descriptions of the effluent pipe, the sludge, and the smell with descriptions of the adverse effects on locals. This section of the report echoes the stories told in direct encounters, describing how infants cry through the night due to breathing difficulties, giving their parents insomnia and nightmares. The report not only feels for the people, but also seeks to elicit these feelings in the reader.

While James acknowledged that the report was emotionally charged, in his view this was not an inadequacy by any means. Regardless of the tone of the report, he argued, the facts of the report spoke for themselves. He described how, shortly after the report was published, the company held a press conference dismissing it on the grounds that it was not "unbiased" (*niṣpakṣam*). When the press asked him for his response, he agreed that it was not unbiased, but he challenged anyone to prove that the report was false. And he suggested that no one could do this because of all the facts in the report. Even if it was not neutral, no one could refute the facts.

"It is not a false report," he explained, "All the same, it is not a neutral [report]. The report is, I mean uh, it feels for the people."

James' understanding of moral facts differs in important ways from the epistemological assumptions implicit in either the direct encounters of the Action Council or in Asha's notion of "facts and figures." In direct encounters, empathetic alignment with campaign participants is deployed in tandem with ontic alignment. *Vikāram* feeds into evidence and vice versa. Asha also recognizes the epistemic power of emotion, but sees it in a more negative light. In her view, it is

because of this power that a scientific approach requires distance from the intense emotion of the campaign. For James, however, emotional alignment with the campaign is unproblematic so long as the facts are also there. He presents emotional involvement as a distinct aspect of *Jananīti's* report that, though agreeing with the facts, could not be understood to taint them in anyway. The voice of the people might sing through, harmonizing with the facts, but the facts still spoke with their own voice.

Critics of the report argued, on the contrary, that the *Jananīti* report's emotion rendered its facts unconvincing. It was not necessarily the case that they believed the facts were tainted by bias, as the company claimed. What they argued, rather, was that presenting the facts in an emotional, "unscientific" way made them appear biased to others. And pragmatically, when it came to persuading non-activists to support the campaign, perceptions of bias were as much a problem as bias itself.

Such was the criticism of Fahad, a young professor at a nearby engineering college and a member of Justice Now, a Muslim youth group that had long worked in solidarity with the Gandhamur campaign. During much of my research, Fahad was working on a new study that was meant to make up for the inadequacies of earlier attempts at producing people's science for Gandhamur. He saw the *Jananīti* study as one source of scientific evidence for the Gandhamur campaign. Its failing, he argued, was in the feelings it evoked in its presentation of that evidence.

"From the beginning itself, anyone reading that report will feel that it is a report meant to help the struggle win. But the report we are preparing, without feeling that it is the struggle's report - eh, not without feeling, not like that...This [is] evidence. Facts."

Fahad wanted the Gandhamur campaign to produce its own scientific reports, but he did not want the reader to feel that it is "the struggles report." At the same time, Fahad was careful

not to say what he almost did say: that he was trying to keep the reader from feeling that this was the struggle's report, even though it was. Instead, he says only that the reader should encounter the report as "facts," that is, not with feeling nor without feeling. Not as the struggle's, nor not as the struggle's, but as simply science. Activist scientific work, he argued, is necessary to produce such facts, but these facts should nonetheless be read as disconnected from the mediations of activist science, as immediate.

Producing this sort of immediacy, in Fahad's view, was a matter of following the "pattern" of science in the methods and presentation of research. Having never conducted a study of pollution before, Fahad researched the procedures for environmental impact assessments set out by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He adopted many of their research methods, such as mapping out zones for sampling and taking samples in triplicate. Thus, he could claim that his study had "nothing that was not scientific." In addition, he said, he structured the report "in the pattern of science"—with abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, abbreviations list, and references—all in the "standard" order. Late in my research, I visited him at the college, and we paged through the completed report together: two thick, colorful volumes of tables and charts, sandwined between glossy white plastic with brass clasps at the corners. Like the campaign participants, he told me that nothing good could be expected from government science. But without some scientific evidence, the campaign would never win. And here that evidence was.

In certain respects, Fahad's report was not immediately recognizable as people's science. The report was meant to persuade scientists and to be usable in court cases, he explained, and would be hard for non-scientists to understand. Although he anticipated that I, as a fellow scientist, would appreciate its findings, he acknowledged that it would not be readable by

common people. Its scientific form, which made it so powerful in other respects, also made it difficult to communicate to those it was meant to serve. For that reason, Fahad planned to summarize the results in a PowerPoint presentation and present them to the Action Council and its supporters before publication.

But Fahad's PowerPoint did not go quite as planned. A week after our interview, he stood before dozens of participants in the Gandhamur campaign in a large hall in the nearby town of Chalakudy, defending his findings. For most of the presentation, the audience had been quite silent. Local campaign participants nodded and murmured as Fahad presented maps of the sampling sites. One man, a scientist with the fisheries department, raised some issues with some of his conclusions about microorganisms in the samples, but Fahad seemed to handle the matter well. Near the end, however, there were more questions along these lines, and a problem began to take shape. Fahad had found levels of certain bacteria that can be hazardous, but he had said little or nothing about heavy metals or cancer. He had found pollution, but not the pollution that the campaign had been protesting all this time. He countered objections by suggesting that his results opened up new possible directions for the campaign, which would be grounded in firmer evidence. But this did not seem to satisfy, and the presentation ended on an ambiguous note. The next day, I received news that the release of Fahad's study had been postponed indefinitely.

When I departed Kerala several months later, it still had not been released.

Fahad, like James, believed that moral facts could persuade even when science was undertaken with activist motives. People's science was possible because of this obdurate power of facts; the impossibility of explaining them entirely in terms of empathy or ethical alignment. But whereas James asserted, against his critics, that the facts speak for themselves, Fahad attributed the power of facts to the processes by which they were produced and the forms in

which they were presented. Only by employing internationally recognized research techniques, Fahad believed, could he produce facts that would not be tainted by activist emotion or written off as "what you say." But if the *Jananīti* study failed because it felt for the people too much, Fahad's study failed because the "neutral" evidence it produced was out of sync with the needs of the campaign.

If the efforts of the Gandhamur Action Council to produce people's science appear to assume a realist moral ontology, they also challenge any straightforward account of how moral reality can be accessed. Even if injustice is out there in the world, showing it to be there is no easy task. On the one hand, even if they were convinced on their own account, activists recognized that emotional alignment could overshadow or even eclipse a moral fact, rendering its persuasive force null. On the other hand, activists had no guarantee that reality, when summoned, would speak with one voice. Perhaps in other circumstances, the discordance between Fahad's study and the campaign's claims might have been distributed to separate realities. But in this case, the purpose of people's science was precisely to resolve tension between scientific evidence and the experiences of the people. Instead of resolving tension, however, Fahad's study threatened to heighten the problems with evidence that the campaign already faced.

The campaign's rejection of Fahad's argument that his evidence opened up new strategic possibilities for the campaign helps to indicate just how committed campaign leaders were to the unity and coherence of moral reality. After all, given that Fahad's evidence of micro-organic pollution did directly contradict the campaign's claims, it might seem that the campaign would have been more prudent to take his advice. This adjustment have brought their claims into agreement with some substantial scientific evidence. Moreover, it might seem that if they were really committed to realism, they would have had to accept that their old views were incorrect.

As one activist explained to me, however, Fahad's proposal was impossible. Campaign participants' narratives of cancer, respiratory problems, and heavy metals were not simply strategic frames aimed at persuading others, they were how they understood their own opposition to the factory. They were the basis of *vikāram*. In other words, switching to the understanding of pollution that Fahad proposed would not have been simply a matter of the best means to an end. Accepting his evidence threatened the end itself. The decision to prefer their own experiences over Fahad's evidence might have been bad science, but it was also testimony to how important it was to Gandhamur activists that the injustice they fought was a coherent reality.

7.5 Two stories about injustice

Several months after his first direct encounter with pollution in Gandhamur, Sunil began to express skepticism again. Only it was different this time. Earlier he had resisted siding with the gelatin factory campaign because of the neutrality he believed was appropriate to his role as a researcher. Now, he was suspicious of foul play. Suspicion was in the air at the time: after the clash with police, the campaign had received a surge of media attention and popular support. The pipe had broken in the midst of this high point, when victory had seemed all but certain. But thereafter the campaign had begun to cool, many outside supporters withdrew, and media attention dwindled (see Chapters 2 and 3). There were grumblings about betrayal within the Action Council. There were rumors about Sunil and me as well. In the midst of all this, Sunil had begun to voice doubts about the methods and motives of campaign organizers.

Recall, for example, the incident with which I open Chapter 3, in which Sunil and I were riding our tandem bicycle into Gandhamur, having received news that there had been a fishkill in the canal behind the factory. Stopping for a cold soda along the way, we overheard a few tidbits from the shopkeeper and other patrons. The shopkeeper said the fish that had died were too large

to have really come from that canal, that the campaign must have just thrown some dead fish in themselves, but others said that they had seen little fish floating on the water as well. As we remounted our bike, Sunil asked me, "Did the fish die, or did they kill the fish?"

For Sunil, our direct encounter with pollution that day no longer held the same persuasive force as on his first day in Gandhamur. Indeed, as time passed, Sunil had begun to express that he was no longer sure he could smell the pollution anymore. He smelled things sometimes, he explained, but he was not sure he smelled what everyone else was talking about. At one point, he told me that he doubted whether he had *ever* really smelled it.

Sunil's experiences of suspicion and doubt show a different side to our account of activist evidence. If the smells and colors of injustice had at one time compelled him to join the cause, his alienation from the campaign now seemed to make such unmediated encounters with injustice less possible. Our other stories of activist evidence in Gandhamur have shown how reality can affect the ethical positions people take. Here, as counterbalance, is a story of how ethical positions can influence perceptions of what is real.

Of course, the influence of ethical positioning is important to our other accounts of activist evidence as well. In the direct encounter ritual, Gandhamur activists sought to embed the smells and colors in their own life narratives, so that sensation and solidarity were blended into the experience of pollution. Empathy and experience were always deployed in concert, each supporting the other, so that is impossible to say whether reality or intersubjectivity is more fundamental. But even the KPCB researcher's refusal of empathy was an ethical act which influenced how the stuff in the water affected her. The problem then, is how to make sense of both of these stories—encounters with reality affecting evaluation and evaluation affecting how we encounter reality—at the same time.

One way would be to stress the sharedness of shared moral realities. In this account, ethics is something that people do, in which social relations are at stake. Under the metaphor of ethical positioning, or stance, evaluation of any object puts one into alignment or disalignment with others, generating moral solidarity or antagonism (see Chapters 1, 3, and 6). When activists in Gandhamur make claims about pollution, then, they are not fundamentally concerned with what is in the water or the air, but rather with where they stand in the agonistic field defined by the opposition between the campaign and the factory. This view works well with traditional accounts of social movement framing, in which activists are primarily concerned with recruiting more people. A frame may take the form of a claim about reality, but its motive is given by the strategic aims of a social movement organization such as the Action Council, not by an encounter with an unjust world.

Focusing on evidence helps to highlight the limitations of this understanding of ethics. Already, the metaphor of stance requires some object mediating alignment or disalignment, just as Schutz' account of the intersubjective "we relationship" needs a flying bird. When we examine the evidentiary practices people undertake to back their ethical claims, these subject-object relations come to the fore. It mattered to Sunil that it was colors and smells, not only activists, that persuaded him. It mattered to Asha that facts and figures should be the basis of her actions, even if she already empathized with the campaign. It mattered to James that facts could speak for themselves. None of these people describe their ethical positions purely in terms of intersubjectivity or the importance of social relations. Indeed, much appears to be at stake in understanding activist evidence as more than a recruitment strategy.

These accounts of activist evidence do not force us to abandon the view that the moralness of moral realities has its basis in the stances people take with respect to objects of

evaluation. Gandhamur activist may understand themselves to have encountered injustice in the world, but we can certainly re-describe these encounters as impositions of values upon the world.

Within such a framework, claims about moral realities must be understood, with Mazzarella (2006), as a kind of false consciousness—a denial of the social constructedness of what we construct. We could still acknowledge that talk of reality is particularly important to people when ethical matters are at stake, and that such talk can have significant pragmatic effects on social life (Keane 2013). Nonetheless, claims to have encountered injustice in the world would only be describable as a pervasive and highly consequential error—a fiction with a social function.

An alternative approach would be to take something closer to Gandhamur activists' own view and treat justice and injustice as properties of real objects. Seen in this way, claims about reality are not only about ethical alignments or disalignments; they are also demonstrably more or less accurate. Thus, the difference between Sunil's initial moment of certainty and his later moment of doubt would be readable as more than a story about shifting alliances to which the question of injustice serves as a mere foil. Instead, the question of injustice remains a real question that, in part because of one's commitments, can be difficult to answer. Sunil was certain because he thought he had encountered a real injustice. He doubted because he believed he may have been misled. But both certainty and doubt presupposed that injustice could be real and could be known. The difference would not be an indication of the arbitrariness of Sunil's evaluations, but of the difficulty of evaluating correctly.

Graeber, building on the work of Bhaskar and other critical realists, has recently argued that "it is one of the defining qualities of reality that it cannot be completely known" (2015, p. 27). It is when we debate what is uncertain, he points out, that we invoke reality. The realist view

I propose here extends this argument to invocations of moral reality as well. The uncertainty surrounding these invocations is what reality is all about. From this perspective, to treat moral claims as purely social is to commit something like Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy: "that statements about being can always be transposed into statements about our knowledge of being" (2008, p. 16). Sunil's claims to have smelled (or not smelled) injustice in Gandhamur are not merely self-referential statements about his own position; they are statements about being. As such, they can be more or less correct, more or less doubtful, but they cannot be written off as fictions altogether.

To what extent would such a realist understanding of activist evidence conflict with anthropology's traditional emphasis on the cultural specificity of ethical values? As noted above, even as Gandhamur activists' claims presuppose some degree of coherence and unity of moral reality, their predicament also illustrates how states can employ a scientist variety of moral realism to delegitimize opposing views. Such appropriation of the real by the powerful is at the root of anthropology's opposition to realism historically, and critics of recent calls for ethical naturalism expressed the same concerns.

One way of addressing this problem is the notion of affordances (Keane, 2016). Described in terms of affordances, a value-laden world may affect one's evaluations without determining them. More importantly, the same world need not necessarily afford the same evaluations for all people. What is good for some need not necessarily be good for all. The concept of affordances would thus help us to understand the intensive work Gandhamur activists undertook to conduct the direct encounter ritual successfully. In particular, we could see why they sought to address the KPCB researcher as a fellow parent, rather than only as a scientist. The smell of pollution might afford a stronger sense of injustice for a parent or a layperson than

for a scientist or a government researcher.

It is not clear, however, that affordances are powerful enough to account for the kind of persuasive force that both Gandhamur activists and scientists attributed to evidence of injustice. In Sunil's account of how he was affected by the pollution, for example, is it enough to say that smells and colors made his new commitment to the campaign possible? It would seem, rather, that he experienced the world as demanding this commitment, not merely affording it. Similarly, the aim of research on pollution is ostensibly to make a particular evaluation not merely possible, but undeniable. As James and Fahad discovered, summoning the persuasive force of ethically charged realities may require a lot of work, but this was at least in part because the ethical implications of evidence were difficult to control. Evidence was both desirable and risky insofar as it made certain ethical positions unavoidable.

At least in some cases, then, we may need a concept more causally effective than affordance to describe human engagement with a value-laden world. But this is not to say that the evaluative content of reality is ever transparent or deterministic. At a minimum, a value-laden world must be as complex, contingent, and conjunctural as we know the world to be.⁶⁶ Moreover, any account of the persuasive force of things would still need to situate that force within the persuasive practices of humans. There are no direct encounters in Gandhamur without the direct encounter ritual. And if Gandhamur activists believed that moral realities could be known, they were just as certain that prejudices, intense emotion, or corruption could obscure these realities. Even the most obvious injustices, it would seem, are moving only for those who allow themselves to be moved.

⁶⁶ For this phrasing, I am indebted to the account of non-deterministic causality developed by critical realists, particularly the theoretical work of George Steinmetz (1998) and Philip Gorski (2004).

Our picture of activist evidence reveals a tension in ethics as way of relating to others and ethics as a way of relating to the world. If the metaphor of stance foregrounds the way an evaluation of an object is also a position with respect to other subjects, evidentiary practices help to bring the evaluated objects back into view. For the activists in Gandhamur, the objects matter; evaluative positions must be motivated by smells, or facts and figures, or their narrative of injustice is only a matter of "what you say." Evaluation, for them, is not only a matter of how subjects position themselves in relation to objects, but also of how objects are positioned in relation to subjects. This does not mean that anthropology cannot continue to describe ethics a matter of subject-subject relations in which objects only mediate social alignments and oppositions. But it does highlight one weakness of this approach to ethics: we must continue to wonder why people so often argue about good or bad, injustice or justice as if they were out there in the world. Relatedly, moves from is to ought will continue to seem awkwardly unjustifiable. Throughout my account of activist evidence, the validity and even necessity of such moves is the one thing that no one involved—neither the activists, nor the scientists, nor the ambivalent research assistant—ever really doubted. To adequately account for this, we need some minimal moral realism of the kind I describe here.

In the last three chapters, I have traced how various trajectories of force interact in activists' efforts to change themselves and others. I have shown how activists' creative work upon themselves is always also tied up with the influences of others and of the material world. Persuasion, which has already begun in the process of work upon the self, likewise unfolds as a convergence of multiple forces, including the inspiration and demands of a non-neutral material world. In this analysis, I have considered how the ethical dimensions of activism can shed light on ethical life more generally. In the next and concluding chapter, I consider the limits of this

move. I employ the tools offered by my analysis thus far to ask what is specific to activist ethics, and how activists' ethical lives may differ from those of non-activists. In doing so, I also address an ethical problem at the heart of activist experience: how does one become an activist?

Chapter 8: Becoming an Activist

8.1 Trapped

"I am afraid."

"Hmmm?"

I searched Sunil's face to see if he was joking. We were standing on the railway platform, sipping cold club sodas while we waited for the train. We had been talking about his recent interview in Mumbai, where he had applied to the master's of social work (MSW) program at the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS), the most prestigious social work program in India. As happens when two people spend nearly every day together for a year, everything in our conversation had been said a few times before, and my mind had wandered. But now, he had my attention. He was serious.

"It's the Dialogue Journey," he explained, "Its route comes right through my *nāṭ*.⁶⁷ They have a plan to come right through that town that is near my house, you know that main junction? Rajendran-uncle asked me if I know people at any of the local youth clubs. He wants me to organize a welcome party. I do know plenty of people, but...my uncle's quarry..."

After their split with the campaign against the Gandhamur gelatin factory (see Chapter 2), activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* had increasingly given their attention to granite quarrying in the Western Ghats mountains. As described in Chapter 3, meeting with the action councils of

⁶⁷ *Nāṭ* is a term meaning the place to which one belongs, usually the place of one's kin. For detailed discussion, see Chapter 2.

quarry struggles—and, ultimately, organizing a coalition among them—became a major aim of the Dialogue Journey, a fifty-day trek through the Western Ghats with an official mission of raising awareness about environmental degradation. As Sunil and I followed preparations for the journey, the anti-quarry focus of the event had become a source of some anxiety for him. Now, that anxiety had greatly increased.

"It all depends on which way they go," he said, tracing the Journey's possible routes in the air with his hands, "There is a split in the road there. One road goes off this way to [a large town], and the other one curves off this way and goes right past my house. As long as they do not go down the road to my house, it is okay."

Sunil's fear was two-edged. On the one hand, he was afraid to say no to Rajendran, the main organizer of the Dialogue Journey. As discussed in Chapter 5, although people of all ages participated in the Dialogue Journey, one of its major aims had been to cultivate a new generation of activist youth—that is, unmarried people between their late teens and early 30s. Rajendran, an activist who had himself been a youth during the emergence of Kerala's environmental movement in the 1970s, had been working full time to organize a collective called Youth Forum for the previous year or so, often living in the *Kēraḷīyam* office. The Dialogue Journey was to be the capstone of this work, after which participants in Youth Forum would take the reins themselves. At twenty, Sunil fit in with this crowd in a way that had not been true for our prior fieldwork. Rajendran had, from the beginning, approached Sunil as a potential participant in the Youth Forum, and his invitation to organize a welcome party for the Dialogue Journey followed this pattern. It was clear that Sunil did not want to let him and the other journey participants down.

But at the same time, Sunil was afraid of what might happen if he did organize such an

event in his hometown.

"Everyone there knows that my uncle is the one who gave me my whole education," he told me, "Then if I give him trouble in return..."

Sunil's uncle (his *ammavan*, or mother's older brother) was in the quarry business. Sunil's mother was his father's second wife, the first having died. However, after marrying Sunil's mother, Sunil's father continued to live with the kin of his first wife, from whom he had two children.⁶⁸ As Sunil's mother preferred not to move to her husband's first wife's home, she had remained with her older brother. He had built a small house for her and her two sons, of whom Sunil was the eldest. Throughout his youth, Sunil had watched as his uncle went from being a quarry laborer to purchasing his first small bulldozer, to hiring the men he used to work alongside, to purchasing more and larger equipment. His small but thriving quarry business had put Sunil through his BSW program, making him the first in his family to hold a college degree. His uncle had postponed completing the construction of his home so that this would be possible. When Sunil began receiving his salary as my research assistant, he had tried to give money back to his uncle, but the latter had refused. And now, if he gained admission to the MSW program in Mumbai, his uncle would pay for that as well. How then, could Sunil bring a bunch of anti-quarry activists to his hometown? What would people say if he gave his uncle such "trouble in return"?

Sunil was, in effect, caught between these two fears. If he told Rajendran that he did not

⁶⁸ Matrilocality was common among Muslims from Sunil's region, depending on financial means and the preferences of kin. Thus, his father had settled with his first wife's kin after their marriage. In the same way, it was not unusual that Sunil's mother should remain with her older brother after her marriage. Matrilineality and matrilocality were once very common in Kerala, particularly among the dominant landowning Hindu caste, but to varying degrees in other castes and religions as well (Arunima, 2003). For this reason, and to this day, a woman's older brother often plays an important role in her children's lives.

want to organize the welcome party, then he would be asked why. He would have to admit not only that his uncle was in the quarry business (or “quarry mafia,” as it was called among *Kēraḷīyam* associates), but also that he was unwilling to protest this business. He would be admitting to choosing his family over his activist commitments. If, on the other hand, he organized the welcome party, winning the favor of his new comrades, he would be spiting his uncle and shaming his family, and himself, before the gaze of their *nāṭ*.

In the face of this impossible choice, Sunil's strategy had been to keep quiet and hope Rajendran would forget about the whole thing. Or even that the Journey would take another route altogether. That is why he had suddenly brought it up with me at the railway station that day. He had been silently holding it in, and it had been eating him up inside.

"I had not mentioned to Adarsh or anyone else up to then, and I still have not mentioned it to anyone," he said, asking me to keep it secret as well, "If I bring it up, I might get trapped,"

8.2 Activist ethics as one possibility

In introducing her ethnography of Indian lesbian activists, Naisargi Dave (2011) describes a moment when she realized that an account of the strategies and functions of various lesbian organizations would not sufficiently address questions at the very heart of queer activism. Specifically, such an analysis could not tell us "why are activists, activists?"—that is, what motivates certain lesbian women to act in the ways that define them as activists (Dave, 2011, p. 4). The answer to this question, she finds, is that "collectively, they nurture ethical ideals about what the world could look like. They act out of conflicted, sometimes uncomfortable, beliefs in the possibility of justice" (Dave, 2011, pp. 4, 6). It is this, Dave argues, that makes queer activism about ethics.

In the preceding chapters, I have told a similar tale, exploring how activists in Kerala's

people's struggles make claims about injustice in the current world and attempt to enact and promote their visions for justice. I have attempted to trace the origins and multiple trajectories of the motive forces that drive these activists to undertake this work. But I have also tried to understand how they exert force upon one another, and upon their non-activist social surround, so as to transform their own motives into drivers of broader change—to win people over to their cause. For example, I have shown how documentation of people's struggle feeds into intervention in people's struggle, and vice versa; how a small group of people with convictions about a polluting factory become "the people" appearing before the public; and how sensory encounters with pollution are translated, or not, into action by government officials. Across these and other accounts of ethical force, I have countered the notion that ethics is exclusively driven by the force of society upon individuals or the work of individuals upon themselves. Instead, I present cases in which a range of interacting forces—authority and reasons, peer pressure and self-discipline, bodies as roadblocks and bodies as display—all exert pressure on the evaluative domain of human life and, as such, make a difference to contention within that domain.

In conclusion, then, I wish to bring the fruits of this analysis to bear on a question that has been latent throughout many of the preceding chapters: How does a person become an activist? This question is, of course, proximate to the question of what makes an activist an activist, which Dave suggests should be central to the study of activist ethics. And it is with Sunil's various fears, I believe, that we find the most nuanced and insightful answer.

We have already explored activist becoming in Sunitha's story of gaining awareness and conviction at the seminar led by solidarity organizers, in the practices of stance alignment at the rain camp, or in the direct encounters that Gandhamur Action Council members facilitated between visitors and the sights and smells of pollution. We can see in these stories the impacts of

persuasion by others, of the desire for community, and of the qualities of material things. Each of these are motive forces that might contribute to a non-activist becoming an activist. But in each case the answer is unsatisfactory because activist becoming was never really under question. We have, in the main, examined the change narratives of those who are already activists—whether retrospective stories of one’s own transformation or prospective efforts to bring others to the cause. But in such narratives, it is hard to fully appreciate the possibility that one could take an entirely different path, that one could also *not* become an activist.

By contrast, Sunil was, during much of our work together, uncomfortably situated between being an activist and not being an activist. Accompanying me on fieldwork, Sunil was thrust into the midst of people's struggle activism suddenly and with little foreknowledge of what this might entail. Although he had just completed his bachelor's in social work, he had no previous encounter with Kerala's alternative leftist circles. As suggested in the previous chapters, many of the values of Faiza and Adarsh were strange to him. Moreover, their opposition to organized religion was incompatible not only with his own Muslim faith, but also with his efforts to avoid lapsing in the routines of prayer and mosque attendance with which he had grown up. And yet, he also felt drawn to participate more fully in at least some aspects of the *Kēraḷīyam* community, and this desire became stronger as our research went on, particularly as he was introduced to other activists his own age. At the same time, he continued to desire to please his uncle. His fears of being rejected by Rajendran and the Youth Forum participants, or by his uncle and the people of his *nāṭ*, were the counterpart to these desires. The story of how Sunil negotiated these desires and fears became a story of how a person might, or might not, become an activist.

I have already indicated, in the opening to Chapter 1, how living alongside Faiza and

Adarsh exerted pressure on Sunil, and I have suggested that he experienced this pressure as a kind of unfreedom, an unpleasant force from outside himself. We have also seen, in Sunil's "direct encounter" with pollution in Gandhamur, how other external influences bore upon his ethical positions without the same negative affective impact. But Sunil was also actively engaged in responding to the various positions and life paths that presented themselves among the activists we studied together. He weighed these new values and new relationships against the values with which he had been raised and the community of kin among whom he had, up to that time, most identified. As he considered what it would mean to take on the values and practices of the activists he met, Sunil came up against Dave's question ("why are activists, activists?") as a puzzle for who he should be. Thus, following him as he found his own path among divergent possibilities is one way of exploring what is particular to the ethical lives of activists. In the gap between possibly become an activist and possibly not, we can join him in exploring how activist ethics differ from other forms of ethical life.

8.3 Dialogic shifts

Shortly after Sunil confided in me about his fears regarding the Dialogue Journey's route, we found ourselves stepping out of a small tour bus into one of the largest granite quarries in Kerala. We were taking part in a weekend trip to Faiza's ancestral home in the Western Ghats, arranged by her father and occasioned by a ceremony he had organized in honor of her deceased mother. With us were Faiza, her sister, a few of their cousins, my wife, some neighbors from across the street, and a gaggle of kids of various lineage, including my own baby daughter. The first stop on our sight-seeing excursion was the quarry.

As we walked up a steep hill, our sandals splashing in fine red sand, I wondered how our group had decided to stop there at all. The quarry had a brutal beauty; it sliced through the dull,

black rind of the rockface to reveal clean, new granite, as white as bone breaking through the skin. But Faiza was leading our tour, and I felt sure that this could not be where she wanted to take us.

At the top of that first hill and the bottom of many more, we came to a place where there were dump trucks parked and men reclining in the shade of a few wide-reaching trees. There was a shed with a machine inside, making a sound like eating: crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, except that it never stopped to swallow, it just went on like that. On one side of the shed was a conveyor belt made of large shovels, like the scoops of an old-fashioned waterwheel, which lifted broken rock from some unseen cache below and dropped it into a metal box. A second conveyor belt extended from the box like a long metal tongue, and from the tongue's tip an unbroken stream of gray dust poured down into a waiting truck, sending up a cloud of fine mist as it fell, like steam rising over pouring tea.

I could not help but feel sickened. And I wondered, as I noticed that feeling, whether I would have felt the same a few months before. Over the course of my research in Kerala, I had begun to notice differences in myself that were both sensory and evaluative at the same time. Some were of the sort that one would expect in any long-term visitor: my food began to feel incomplete without the flavor of coconut, which is an ingredient in nearly every Kerala dish. But there were other changes that were matters of taste in a different sense. Kerala's many rubber plantations, which had been cool groves when I first encountered them years before, now looked desolate; I could see only the forests that had been cleared to plant them. Elaborate mansions, with their high concrete walls, which I might have admired previously, were now only mountains broken up and chewed to dust. The influence of the activists I studied upon my own ethical views was, no doubt at the root of these changes in taste. In this sense, I understood them. But I

did not like them. For the most part, they made my world less beautiful. And now that quarries, rubber plantations, and mansions were distasteful, I could not experience them any other way.

For me, our whole quarry tour was like that. We climbed until we could take in a wide vista, with endless hills and valleys stretching away below. Here and there, naked black mounds erupted like stone bubbles over the rolling green waves. My eye immediately fell upon the little white bitemarks that had begun to gnaw the mounds away. Some had been whittled down to pencil-point spires, as spindly and white as church steeples. But I could not see them like steeples; I could only think that no one would ever know the size and shape of the mounds that had once been there.

The more I explored this new revulsion in myself, the more I wondered if Sunil had begun to feel it too. As we came to one crest, there was a twisting cylinder of stone with another boulder, a huge block, balanced delicately on top, like the head of a hammer. Sunil joked about how someone must have come and forgotten it there, a joke that had come into my mind at almost the same moment. It was a common occurrence in those days, near the end of our work together, when we had so many months behind us. But that day, trying to feel out changes in myself, this small moment of resonance made me wonder whether he might also have changed in similar ways. If he had, how would I know?

That day, I could find little sign that Sunil saw the quarry the way that I did. He and Faiza's cousins were mostly caught up in posing and snapping photos of one another in front of the boulders. Faiza, still in the role of tour guide, made her own position clear with a short social history of the place, describing how it had once been a tourist destination for very different reasons: the boulders had been dotted with small ponds, worn into the rock by millennia of rain, and the water had been thought to have healing powers. Now, she said, all of that had

been destroyed. I had pulled Sunil aside and had Faiza repeat this narrative, but it was hard to tell what it meant to him. As we walked back, past the dust-making machine, he had rejoined Faiza's cousins, who were snapping photos all the way down the hill.

I continued to wonder about how Sunil might, or might not, be changing, but I was reluctant to ask him about it directly. As his employer and mentor in ethnographic fieldwork, I had learned to be careful about too quickly expressing my evaluations of what we encountered together. As noted earlier, Sunil was often quiet about his views. In our first months together, I had felt that he was particularly reluctant to express views that might differ from my own. Over time, he had begun to more frequently and directly disagree with me. But with regard to quarries and other environmental issues, my sense was that he was not entirely sure what he thought. As such, any direct question might push him to answer in a particular way. So rather than prying for answers, I waited and watched.

A few weeks after our quarry visit, as the Dialogue Journey began, I saw some signs that Sunil had begun to adopt ethical positions that aligned with those common among the activists we studied. On the first day of the Journey, when he and I stopped at a snack shop, some locals asked us why we were there, Sunil explained the mission and activities of the Journey in the first person plural, as if he also was conducting it. When he was done, I felt the need to clarify—given my status as a foreigner—that I was there as a researcher, not a participant. In the days that followed, Sunil visited houses with members of Youth Forum and, though he took some notes and audio recordings, he also participated in discussion, expressing many of the same views held by the activists. Later, he talked to me about this process, explaining that it had made him feel more a part of things.

And yet, I wondered, how could I be sure that this increased participation reflected

changes in Sunil's own views? Without question, in his conversations with journey participants and people we met along the way, Sunil was increasingly placing himself in ethical alignment with the mission of the Dialogue Journey. But how much of this was motivated by changes in his commitments and how much by concern for what others would think of him? For example, Sunil's fear of organizing the welcome party seemed to be motivated primarily by concern about what the consequences would be, on the one hand, for his relationship with his uncle and, on the other hand, for his relationships with Rajendran and other activists. Sunil's response to this dilemma—to keep quiet and hope Rajendran forgot about the matter—seemed mainly to reflect a fear of being found out as kin of the “quarry mafia,” not concern about the environmental impacts of quarries. This made it seem possible that his expressions of alignment with activists' views during the Dialogue Journey were also mainly about wanting to be accepted.

Sunil's narrative about his fear of bringing home plastic bags seems to exemplify this disjuncture between change motivated by social pressure and change motivated by a more internal process of re-evaluation, like the process I felt was transforming my own sensory experience. Sunil now recognized plastic bags as ethically salient—as something for which he could be called to account. But were plastic bags ethically important to him? In response to his fear, he had stashed the bag in a water reservoir, an act that would surely have met with even more disapproval from Faiza than bringing it home. This seems to suggest that what had changed for him was not the ethical import of plastic bags, but only recognition of the possibility of censure.

However, even in the case of the plastic bags, I found it hard to see the changes in Sunil entirely in this way. First because, I also had experienced anxieties of the sort Sunil described, and I felt that the changes in myself were not reducible to these emotions. And second, because

during fieldwork I had often sensed that there was a lot of slippage between what people took others to hold them accountable for and how they judged themselves. My analysis of ethical stickiness speaks to this (see Chapter 5). Those who continued to eat cookies were explicit in their rejection of Ali's evaluation of cookies, and yet that evaluation became a part of their conversation with one another. In that case, of course, this “internalization” of accountability was no necessary indication of alignment between cookie eaters’ opinions and those of Ali; indeed, they began to take each other to task for *not* eating cookies. Thus, such porosity of the boundary between internal and external would not be enough to account for an experience like my own, in which my sensorium had begun to fall into line with environmentalist values. Nonetheless, I could not help feeling that Sunil’s outward displays of altered opinions could not have remained only on the surface. Some of it, if not concern for plastic litter, must have gotten its barbs into him.

Mahmood, in her study of piety movements among Muslim women in Cairo, describes a process of ethical formation that traverses boundaries between internal and external much more profoundly and completely—not only introducing accountability into a conversation, but fundamentally transforming opinions and desires. She describes how, in the self-understanding of these women, "submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for the self to achieve its potentiality" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 149). For example, fear of divine retribution is not understood to be a purely external motive, but is rather a virtue that one must cultivate in order to develop the will to obey God (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 142,143). As one piety movement adherent explained, this fear is not the same as fear of the dark; it is what you feel "when you confront something or someone you regard with respect and veneration" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 143). Thus, we might understand divine retribution itself as external, but its moral force is premised on an

(internal) attitude of reverence for divine moral authority and directed at transformation of the force of the will.

Mahmood's argument about the entanglement of internal and external forces is very much in line with my own arguments in the previous chapters. But Sunil's engagement with the norms of the activists we studied was very different from the process of ethical formation Mahmood describes. For example, while Sunil often expressed admiration for Faiza and Adarsh's activist commitment and seemed to desire their approval, I saw no indication that he actively cultivated this desire for approval (nor fear of disapproval), nor that his fear of being "found out" by Faiza or Rajendran actually served to shape his own commitments.

Nonetheless, there was evidence to suggest that Sunil had internalized the activists' ethical views in a different sense, one that was neither mere stickiness nor necessarily an alignment with these views. In one of my final conversations with Sunil, when I had run out of time to wait and watch, I asked him frankly about how his opinion on quarries compared with those espoused by the Dialogue Journey participants. His response was uncharacteristically immediate and comprehensive; it was clear that he had already given the question considerable thought. While he agreed that the really big quarries should be shut down, he felt strongly that activists were wrong to oppose all quarries. He argued that smaller quarries, of the sort his uncle digs, were needed if people were going to build houses for themselves. He said that the argument common in the *Kēraḷīyam* crowd, that people should build "alternative" (*badal*) houses out of mud, was simply impractical.

This explicit description of Sunil's views, in and of itself, could tell me little about how Sunil may or may not have been affected by the activists we studied. To be sure, it clarified where he stood, positioning him somewhere between the activists and the "quarry mafias" they

opposed. But it did not tell me whether he was changing. It was only a moment later, when we began to talk about his silence with regard to these views, that I began to see how the activists were affecting him.

"Have you ever shared these opinions with anyone?" I asked.

"Oh, no, if I said that, they would all turn against me!" he replied, "Who knows what would happen?"

But although Sunil had not told any of the Dialogue Journey participants his opinions, he explained that he had imagined doing so.

"At the time of those discussions, I stand up like that and say, "I am really a quarry person!"

"You said that?!"

"No, no! I thought that. I imagined. If I said that sometime, what would they do?"

Sunil described his imagination of this scenario in two ways. He described how they would all turn against him. Laughing, he speculated that they would kill him. He also described the reasons that they would give for why he was wrong. He said that they would propose "alternative things" (*badalāyittuḷḷa kāryanna!*). For example, he surmised that they would point out that many people have built houses that are just sitting empty,⁶⁹ and people should just share those.

"But not everyone will be able to accept that," he said, "But then, they'll probably say, 'Selfishness. You're not looking after the future, [you're just looking after] your own interests.' That's what they'll say. For each matter, they'll have some argument."

⁶⁹ In Kerala, many of the largest and most elaborate houses were owned by people working overseas (see Chapter 1). These were often described, by activists and non-activists alike, as sitting empty.

Like so, Sunil voiced the activists' objections to his views, responded to them, and allowed them the possibility of response in turn. He allowed that some of their points were difficult to refute. For example, he acknowledged that they were right to be concerned about the future; he agreed that current quarrying could be a problem for the next generation. He raised this point in the imagined voice of the activists, and he let it stand. But in response to other points, he gave succinct counters. Over months of imagined dialogue, Sunil had worked out nuanced arguments on both sides. Although he had carefully kept silent about his opinions, he had also been talking with the activists all along.

Like the processes of ethical formation Mahmood describes, Sunil's imagined dialogues confound dichotomies between internal or external, self and other. Though the notion of "internal dialogue" is useful here, we should not forget how much this process is informed by Sunil's participation in the activities and discussions he had observed. In voicing the opinions of activists, Sunil mixed past tense reports of what they had said in similar situations with future tense predictions of what they would say, if he said such and such. Thus, the dialogue he presented shifted ambiguously between experienced and imagined, between overheard speech and inner speech. Sunil had internalized the activists not as models for his own behavior, but as interlocutors.

And yet, this dialogue is also radically disconnected from these interlocutors. And in this way Sunil's process stands in stark contrast to what Mahmood describes; if practitioners of piety blur the distinction between internal and external by opening themselves to normative pressure, Sunil's dialogues continue despite a closure to such forces. The fear of censure that motivates Sunil to keep silent in actual discussions (or to stash a plastic bag in the reservoir) has no force here. If Faiza doubts whether Sunil's concern with plastic bags is motivated only by such fear,

his imagined dialogue shows that, with regard to the problem of quarries, such an explanation cannot suffice. Rather, by convincing him that sharing his views openly with the activists is impossible ("they would kill me"), Sunil's fear leads him to a form of dialogue where he need not be concerned with what anyone thinks of him. In this sense, we might say that his refusal to talk opens up a space of radical freedom.

8.4 Ethics without contention

By the third week of the Dialogue Journey, it seemed clear that Rajendran had, indeed, forgotten about requesting that Sunil organize a welcome party in his hometown. Moreover, despite participating in many discussions about environmental degradation along the way, Sunil had been careful to give no indication of his own opinions about quarries, let alone his connections to the industry. And yet, as the Journey neared his hometown, Sunil's anxiety was high.

"I'm not going to tell anyone where I'm from," he told me, "I will just say I am from Chalakudy. But some might recognize me. If I tell them my uncle's name, they'll ask me 'Is that Quarry Bashir? Which Bashir? Quarry Bashir? If you say Quarry Bashir, then they might know. Quarry Bashir or Bulldozer Bashir.'"

By a stroke of luck, our route did not go right past Sunil's, as he had feared. Nor did we run into anyone who asked who he was or who his uncle was. We did run into a few friends of his, about his age, and he took care to explain that he was accompanying the activists in his capacity as a researcher, not as a participant. None of his friends raised the topic of quarries.

Even then, Sunil remained tense. He later told me of one particularly hair-raising turn of events, when Rajendran had come over to talk with him at dinner. Sunil had braced himself for the worst, sure that some of the locals must have informed Rajendran about Sunil's uncle's

business. I had been part of the conversation as well, but had had no idea of the anxiety Sunil was experiencing. As it turned out, Rajendran had only come to congratulate him on his recent admittance to the TISS MSW program.

"We have a lot of people up there at TISS," Rajendran said, and he tried to list the names of other young people he knew were studying there, but quickly got stuck on a name. "Anyway, we have a lot of people there. When you get there, you can help to get them organized."

Sunil grinned and bobbed his head affirmatively, but said nothing. The feared moment of reckoning had not come to pass. The next day we left his hometown behind us. He had escaped the trap.

About a week later, Sunil left for the MSW program in Mumbai. He reported to me later that the Mumbai chapter of Youth Forum never took off, but he continued to be interested in issues related to environmental justice and, upon graduation, he secured a job as a researcher with an environmental NGO in northern India. He has been especially interested in using his research to increase public recognition of the environmental knowledge of India's indigenous populations and promote the transfer of this knowledge to the next generation, concerns very much within the ambit of those valued by the activists described here. For many Malayalis, Sunil could well be called an environmental activist.

And yet, Sunil's ethical life took a path very different from those of the other activists described here. Like Adarsh and Faiza, Sunil designed his life largely around the work of promoting his vision for social change. And doing so took him far from home. However, his distance from home was never one of ethical disalignment, as it had been for Adarsh and many of the other activists associated with *Kēraḷīyam* (see Chapter 6). Sunil continues to attend mosque regularly. He makes a respectable salary for someone his age. By his own report, he eats

more or less whatever is readily available—as he and I always did.

On the night of Sunil's goodbye dinner—the same night when Sunil shared the harrowing tale of the plastic bags—Faiza and Adarsh also offered Sunil some gentle criticism and advice. This mode of conversation was unusual in our house. Though Adarsh and Faiza were a good ten years older than Sunil—enough that they might have assumed the right to tell him directly what he ought to do—they generally sought to encourage change more indirectly, even when it came to asking him to clean the bathroom and other mundane matters of sharing food and shelter. But in this final conversation, their advice was explicit and challenging. They felt that his experiences meeting and living alongside so many activists ought to have changed him a great deal, but they were concerned that they had not. Faiza, in particular, expressed concern that, despite having met people who had different ideas, beliefs, and lifestyles, Sunil was still very much a "normal" (English) person with a "neutral" (English) approach to life. She was worried that his pursuit of an MSW might only exacerbate these qualities.

"In my experience, regarding society, these MSW graduates don't have any kind of awareness or sense of reality...They see this "social work" (English) as something very separate [from their relations to family or their societies]. But you have seen a lot of things. You have directly come to know the pulse of people in a place like Gandhamur...All of that should be reflected in your personal life."

For Faiza and Adarsh, MSW graduates were "neutral" because they separated their change-oriented "social work" from their relationships with family and other aspects of "personal life." They believed that one's commitment to social change should touch every part of one's life. Their criticism of MSW graduates and advice to Sunil parallel the scalar perspective that solidarity organizers invoked in accusing the Action Council in Gandhamur of not having

"consciousness" or a "cause." To have awareness means to recognize the equivalent importance of working for change in all aspects of one's social life. In this view, change of self is part and parcel of changing one's social world; it is not enough to simply to undertake a social work career if one remains "normal." Borrowing from Mohandas' seminar a year before, Faiza described the approach of MSW graduates' failure to recognize the integration of changing oneself and changing others as "alienated" (see Chapter 6). Every part of social life, she argued, should be "social work."

As described in Chapter 6, being out of alignment with others is fundamental to Faiza and Adarsh's ethic of activism, which is also a particular approach to activist ethics. In comparing Adarsh and Hari's approaches to disalignment, I have shown that activists face a dilemma between consistency and compromise, in which too much emphasis on consistently living out their values across all aspects of their lives can potentially lead to social isolation. At the same time, however, at least for activists involved in people's struggles, without some degree of social isolation, there is no activism. This is clearly true for rain camp participants, who find togetherness in their difference from the mainstream (see Chapter 3). More generally, we can see recognition of this principle in the centrality of the idea of the "alternative" (*badal*) for those associated with *Kēraḷīyam*. Without asserting some disalignment, some gap between one's own position and that of others, one cannot imagine an alternative social order, nor begin to push for change.

The fundamental necessity of contention to activist ethics also holds for members of the Gandhamur Action Council. Though they do not make a way of life of *badal*, these activists nonetheless contravene the usual preferences for alignment described by Sujit. They are the people who "talk openly"; the people whom Sujit says no one likes. As shown in Chapter 4, what

is important about talking openly is not that activists actually say what they think; what is really central is that they perform a willingness to stand and speak as if they do not care who hears—a willingness, and even desire, for disalignment. Such public displays of their opposition to others are crucial to their claims to be "the people."

Thus, for those in Gandhamur as for those associated with *Kēraḷīyam*, part of the power of activism comes from a willingness to welcome disalignment with others and the social rifts that such disalignment entails. In neither case, of course, is disalignment the whole game. Indeed, the efforts for moral change described here were all ostensibly aimed at alignment; through persuasion, activists sought to bring others into alignment with themselves. But if alignment was the end, disalignment was always crucial to the means. It was where persuasion must begin.

According to Faiza and Adarsh, their concern with Sunil's neutrality sprang from recognition of this fundamental importance to activist ethics of a willingness to be out of alignment with the ethical positions of others, not from any specific desire to win Sunil to their own ethical positions. One might call their advice to him meta-ethical; not advice to take up certain values or a certain way of life, but to take up a certain approach to ethics. But they also believed that, without influencing Sunil's apparent aversion to disalignment, their efforts to change Sunil's values were futile. As Faiza described to me later, she believed that, even if Sunil's thinking had changed during his time with them, any benefit would be outdone by his inclination to blend into the social context in which he found himself.

"I think maybe he has changed in his thinking. Maybe from now on when he goes to take a plastic bag, he'll think 'Oh, if Faiza was here I would not take this bag.' And then, chances are, he'll take the bag," she said, laughing. "Understand? His style is like that—all dependent on his

context."

My aim here is not to determine whether, or to what extent, Faiza is correct in her analysis of Sunil. But her criticism of what she found insufficient in Sunil's supposed approach to life—including to things as small as plastic bags—reveals what she took to be important to her own approach. For Faiza, working for change was premised on a basic willingness not to blend in, a willingness to take a stand and face the possible social fallout. In her view, the meta-ethics required for social change is fundamentally contentious. And in this we find a contrast with Sunil not only as she depicts him, but also as he described his own quarry quandary. Faced with the possibility of social censure or division on either side, Sunil believed that silence was clearly the best choice.

This does not mean that Sunil did not undergo ethical transformation. His imagined dialogues still offered a robust means of engaging with ethical problems—one that is not so socially disconnected as it might at first seem. And it would appear that through such means, Sunil has been able to continue working for social change and, indeed, cultivate a life for himself that is in tune with his own values. But to the extent that these forms of ethical formation avoided contention, they do not contribute to an activist ethics in the terms of the other activists described here.

In the preceding chapters, I have shown how changing oneself and changing others are inter-related in the lives of activists involved in Kerala's people's struggles. Tracing the trajectories of force that traverse these joint projects helps us to think beyond the dichotomy of freedom and unfreedom and see, instead, how selves, others, and material things can all exert pressure upon human ethics. We can see such forces at work in ethical lives whether they are activist or not. But we have found advantage in studying what I have here called “activist ethics”

because it introduces division between selves and their others and engenders controversies over the values claimed to be present in the material world. By setting the various forces of ethical life against one another, activist ethics brings them into relief. For these reason, it not only helps us to understand the ethical lives of those who pursue contention, but also the lives of those who pursue other paths.

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Appendix: Orthography

In transliterating Malayalam to Latin script, I have followed the system developed by Kunjan Pillai (1965) and shown in the table below. Symbols are listed in dictionary order (top to bottom, then left to right). I follow Asher and Kumari (1997) in transliteration of the central vowel “ə,” represented primarily by the diacritic “̣” in Malayalam script, which only occurs in word-final position. I have spelled words with commonly used romanizations (e.g., *panchayat*, *hartal*, and *beedi*) in the usual way.

അ	a	ഘ	gh	ഫ്	ph
ആ	ā	ങ	ṅ	ബ്	b
ഇ	i	ച്	c	ഭ്	bh
ഈ	ī	ചർ	ch	മ്	m
ഉ	u	ജ്	j	യ്	y
ഊ	ū	ജ്	jh	ര്	r
ഋ	r	ഞ	ṇ	ല്	l
എ	e	ട്	t	വ്	v
ഏ	ē	ട്	ṭh	ശ്	ś
ഏ	ai	ഡ്	ḍ	ഷ്	ṣ
ഒ	o	ഡ്	ḍh	സ	s
ഓ	ō	ണ്	ṇ	ഹ്	h
ഔ	au	ത്	t	ല്	l
അം	am	ഥ്	ṭh	ഘ്	gh
ഃ	h	ദ്	d	ഘ്	gh
ക്	k	ധ്	dh	ഘ്	gh
ഖ്	kh	ന്	n	ഘ്	gh
ഗ്	g	പ്	p	ഘ്	gh