As the anti-quarry march neared his home village, Ahmed began to hang further back, separating himself from the group and no longer joining in songs. I walked with him and gradually we found ourselves alone, the rest of the marchers out of sight ahead. We were just entering a stretch of shops and restaurants, the main drag of a small town where Ahmed’s neighbors and kin did much of their shopping. A man stopped us to ask where we were from, and Ahmed told him Palapuram—a town on the other side of the state, where he and I had been living with a family of environmental activists.

“I’m not going to tell anyone where I’m from,” he explained when the man had moved on. “If I tell them my uncle’s name, they’ll ask me: ‘Which Bashir? Quarry Bashir?’”

Over the previous six months, Ahmed and I had visited places where quarries had chewed forested mountains down to bald heaps—places where children coughed on fine, gray dust and parents took to the streets in protest, bearing torches and shouting slogans. Ahmed now strongly opposed the construction of megamalls, multiplex theaters, and other concrete extravagances. But his uncle’s quarry business had supported him and his widowed mother all his life. His uncle had even paid for him to attend college—the same college that had introduced him to the notion of environmental justice and eventually led him into
environmental activist circles. Ahmed was ready to march against quarries in other villages, but he was not sure if he could march at home.

“I’m scared,” he explained. “Everyone here knows my uncle is the one who gave me my whole education. Then if I give him trouble in return. . .”

What is to be gained or lost by becoming an environmental activist? For the year we spent together, Ahmed was always on the edge of activism, weighing this question. He was my research assistant, hired to join me as I conducted anthropological fieldwork with environmental justice movements in Kerala, India. His qualification for the position was his recently acquired bachelor’s in social work, but he had no prior experience with environmental activism. Ahmed was a devout Muslim from a relatively rural part of Kerala, and his year among activists had been a time of questioning, of taking risks, of waking to new consciousness. In this sense, it was an energizing, liberating experience. The pursuit of environmental justice gave his life clearer purpose and brought him into a community of people on a similar path. But at the same time, Ahmed struggled with his new friends’ views on gender roles, marriage, and religion. When he was with them, he found it difficult to keep up his daily prayers and attend Friday services. Most of all, he feared the activists would discover his uncle’s quarry business or that his relatives would discover his participation in anti-quarry campaigns. As the activists made quarries their central focus, Ahmed’s environmentalism seemed to be driving him toward an inevitable clash with those most dear to him.

Such tensions between cause and community are the focus of this book. But not all activists in this book experience or respond to these tensions in the same way. For Faiza and Adarsh, the activist couple with whom Ahmed and I lived during our fieldwork together, leaving behind communities of kin, caste, and party had been part of learning to live for environmental justice. Like Ahmed, they experienced activism as socially risky, but embracing these risks was essential to their notion of a good life. The book also describes activists whose causes arise from their communities. For example, Sunitha joined an Action Council in order to put an end to pollution from a gelatin factory in her own village. Though there were those who disapproved of her activism, including some family members, her struggle for environmental justice grew out of her roles in her community, especially her roles as mother and neighbor.

Environmental justice movements in Kerala are structured by these two approaches to activist life: activism that opposes community to
cause, and activism that combines them. We see the first approach in people like Faiza and Adarsh, for whom environmental justice signified a radical transformation of self and society. These radical environmental activists used a magazine, Kēraliyam, to elaborate and promote this broad vision for change. For others, like Sunitha, activism begins from the direct impacts of environmental hazards on their daily lives. She and other local activists in her village of Manamur took the second approach, protesting pollution in defense of their own community. These two kinds of activists played mutually interdependent roles in environmental justice movements, and their stories sketch a range of possibilities for what an activist life can be.

The quandaries that define the struggle for environmental justice in Kerala are rooted in dilemmas we all face. Each form of activist life speaks to tensions in the form of human life. Humans have the capacity to strive for a particular goal or purpose, to live for something. But they also come from particular communities, social locations, or circumstances; even as they live for, they always also live from. The radical activists’ stories show what can happen when people attempt to hold these two aspects of life apart—to make their moral purposes independent of their community ties. The local Manamur activists’ stories show the power and the limitations of attempting to combine the two synergistically—of living for the people and places one comes from. Each mode of activism brings tensions between living for and living from, cause and community, to the surface. Each casts these tensions in its own light, illuminating its own possibilities and giving rise to its own dilemmas. The insights to be gained are not only for environmental justice activists. Though many of us will never commit ourselves so fully to one path or another, these same tensions at times force all of us to choose.

Ahmed, falling ever further behind the rest of the marchers as he neared his village, felt this keenly. He was convinced that quarrying was destroying the environment, but he also did not want to betray his uncle. He knew, moreover, that many of the other marchers were estranged from their kin because of their activism. Should he stand by his convictions or be loyal to his community? What mattered more?

LIVING FOR AN UNCOMMON CAUSE

Months before Ahmed faced his dilemma on the anti-quarry march, Faiza had spoken about a similar choice. Ahmed and I had joined her on a weekend-long nature program that she had organized for
some college students in a state-protected forest. All the official activities of the day were over, and we were gathered on a sort of veranda outside our sleeping quarters.

It was late March, and the night was cool, dark, and very quiet. I could later recall only two sounds, both steady and calm. One was the shhh of the river threading through boulders in the woods below. The other was the even, confident legato of Faiza’s tuneful voice, talking about what it means to be an activist, a topic she had spoken about many times before. Two dozen students from an art and design college, all men, had arranged themselves around her on the cool concrete floor, legs crossed or splayed. They had been noisy all day, chatting and joking as they picked up tourist trash in the nature preserve, drumming and singing as they rallied in the road, squealing and splashing in the cold river, calling out at the sight of a hornbill, a lion-tailed macaque, or a Malabar giant squirrel. But now they were listening.

Faiza never used the word “activist.” Instead, from various angles, she presented a contrast between two ways of life. On the one hand was the life that the students had been pursuing until now: a life defined by the pursuit of high salaries, suitable marriage partners, and family
approval. This is the usual life in Kerala, she said, but it is a life defined by greed; it feeds on the exploitation of both nature and people. On the other hand were the very sorts of activities the students had participated in that day. She spoke about limiting one’s use of plastic, water, and energy; about protesting against environmentally destructive industries and development projects; and about finding new friends who share one’s values.

“Perhaps it necessary to change humanity’s whole way of life,” she said. “Why can’t such activities be the focus of a life?”

Thus, a choice became clear. But Faiza did not suggest it was an easy choice. She offered her own life as an example, describing how she had given up more lucrative career opportunities to work for a small nonprofit, the River Protection Forum, and how she had become estranged from her mother when she, a Muslim, had married Adarsh, a Hindu. Salary, marriage, family approval—these things had been left behind. But these things, Faiza said, were not the things most worth living for.

“Life is not this thing that your families, societies, and teachers are always trying to scare you about,” she told them. “I’m telling you this because you may have to face such decisions in the future. I hope my words may be helpful.”

The art students were listening. Earlier in the day, a few had expressed that they, too, wanted such a life. For two days and one night, in a forest far from parents and teachers, they had been feeling out the activist life. And yet, even as Faiza talked, the gap between her life and theirs became apparent. In the middle of her speech, one-year-old Tara had begun to bawl for milk. As Faiza took her up and began to nurse, the young men shifted their gaze or turned away. She did it casually as she spoke, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, but Ahmed told me later that it was extremely unusual. He had found it impossible to look at her.

Activists are often defined by their willingness to be radically different, to take a stand for what they believe is right regardless of what anyone else thinks. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once noted, such people are sometimes labeled “extremists” and criticized for being inflexible, impertinent, or divisive. But they are also admired as moral trailblazers, people who have the courage to question the values of their peers and predecessors. Some activists in Kerala see their own lives in this way. They distinguish their lives from those of “common people” (sādharanakkār), whose values are shaped by the mores of their families,
caste groups, political parties, or other communities. Like Faiza, these activists tell of choosing a more liberated and rational way of life—a life guided not by the approval of others but by one’s own vision for a better world.

If activist life is about putting one’s principles over social pressures, cause over community, then environmentalism can seem to take activist ethics to its logical endpoint: an ethics without any community boundaries, even the boundaries of the human community. Environmentalism, some claim, represents the culmination of a progressive broadening of moral concern to ever-wider circles of belonging—from tribe, to nation, to humanity, to ecosystem. In philosophy, this process is described as moral extension. Extensionist environmental thinkers have called for a radical decentering of human concerns to make way for more expansive, ecocentric ethics. Climate science has made this moral point a practical one: it is now clear that the survival of the human species will depend on broader attention to the needs of a global ecological system, not only to the desires and wants of the people residing on the planet today.

In her conversation with college students at the nature camp, Faiza presented the choice between community and cause as fundamental to a way of life. For Faiza and Adarsh, fighting for environmental justice was not just a weekend activity. And while they both spent most of their weekday hours at environmentalist jobs—she at a small NGO focused on protecting riparian ecology and Adarsh at Kēraliyan environmental magazine—activism was not a career either. Often, the choice was a million little choices: organic or conventional, cotton or polyester, ayurvedic or allopathic, soft drinks or water, white sugar or brown. But it could also include singular, path-defining choices, like seeking out a spouse from a different caste or religion. It was building houses out of earth instead of concrete, or avoiding building any house at all. It was marching to the capital, attending seminars in the forest, kissing friends, nursing in public, and singing songs all night in the rain. In pursuit of social change, activists like Faiza and Adarsh explicitly lived counter to the values of those around them—that is, counter to the values of common people (sādhāraṇākār) and, usually, the values of their own kin, neighbors, and peers. Being an activist was being uncommon.

Notably, these activists did not see their concern for the environment as displacing concern for humans. They called environmental protests “people’s protests” (janakīya samaraṇaṁ), and they fought not only for the environment (paristhiti) but also for the people (janaṁ).
practice, “the people” were identified with specific groups who had been impacted by development projects, environmental degradation, or industrial pollution. Activists like Faiza and Adarsh worked in solidarity with these groups to demand justice—thus, I refer to them not only as “radicals” but also as “solidarity activists.”\[^{13}\] But the aim of their solidarity work was not simply to win justice for specific impacted groups. Rather, they viewed group identities and norms as barriers to the pursuit of true justice for all, human and nonhuman alike.

The choice Faiza presented to the students was central to how she understood her own life, but it also captured how her life was seen by others. Radical environmental activists’ moral aspirations set them apart—not only in their self-understanding but also in the assessment of those they called common. For many in Kerala, communities of kin, caste, religion, or political party were formative to their moral lives; they found their purposes in part through their roles in these groups. This was certainly true for Ahmed, whose notion of a good life was, above all, to be a good son, a good nephew, a good Muslim. It was also often true for those impacted by environmental conflicts, to whom activists like Faiza sought to offer their solidarity. From these perspectives, such single-minded commitment to a cause, even if admirable, could seem alien.

**Fighting for Kith and Kin**

Just outside the gate of the Manamur Gelatin Factory, jutting out from the base of the factory wall into the village’s main road, lay a low platform of concrete, topped by a pavilion of bamboo poles and blue plastic tarps. This “protest tent” (samarappantal) served as the headquarters of the local campaign against the factory’s pollution. On most days, it was a quiet place. As a rule, it was always occupied; an empty protest tent was widely understood as a sign that a campaign had lapsed or failed. Yet, by day, the tent was rarely very full. On any given afternoon, I could expect to find a few men there—usually the same few men, slouching low in molded plastic chairs and conversing intermittently, patiently, while dozens of colorful flags and posters proclaimed outrage on their behalf. But as dusk came on, the tent would fill and overflow. More men would arrive, talking loudly and standing in the street. Women would arrive as well, intermingling with their husbands, but also taking their own half of the platform, sharing their own conversations and jokes. And with the women came children, from toddlers to
teens, who sprinted and swatted and squealed and sprawled and made of protest their own games, with the tent as their playhouse.

For those who gathered in the protest tent in Manamur, environmental activism was done with family and neighbors. And it was also done for them. As Sunitha, one of the most regular visitors to the tent, told me, “We mothers joined the Manamur Action Council in order to save our village (nāt).” Others came to the campaign as fathers, sons, or daughters—or simply as “locals” (nāṭṭukār), as those who belonged to Manamur. Their activism was not opposed to group belonging. On the contrary, it was predicated on being a member of certain communities and not others.

The activism of Sunitha and other Manamur locals offers a distinct vantage point for exploring tensions between community and cause. Participants in the Manamur Action Council collaborated closely with activists, like Faiza, who saw environmental justice as an alternative way of life. They sought these activists’ advice and assistance, learned from their expertise, and hosted them in their homes. They also took up the radical environmental activists’ rhetoric, including universalizing abstractions like “nature” and “the people.” Nonetheless, locals in Manamur did not take themselves to be fighting for radical social change, nor did they believe their activism conflicted with their existing
group identities. For Sunitha, there was no reason that pursuing environmental justice necessarily meant estrangement from kin, caste, religion, or party—let alone neighborhood or village. She fought for nature by fighting pollution in her own well and along her village’s stretch of river. When she demanded justice for the people, she was demanding justice for her people.

Just as activists like Faiza distinguished themselves from Action Council participants, calling them both “the people” (janaṁnal) and, at times, “common people” (sādhāraṇakkār), so Action Council members explicitly marked the differences between their activism and that of those they called the “environmental activists” (paristhitika pravart-takar). They acknowledged that the scope of their own activism was narrow by comparison, repeating frequently that their only goal was to stop pollution from the factory. They did not, with a few exceptions, stop drinking Coca-Cola or using Western medicine. They did not usually marry outside of religion or caste, nor take low-paying jobs in environmental NGOs. When one young farmer did start to talk about going organic, others teased him relentlessly. Being “the people” was a form of environmental activism, but it was different from becoming an “environmental activist.” It did not require the kind of life choice that Faiza presented to the art students. One could be “the people” without giving up the life of the “common people.”

The contrast between Faiza and Sunitha, or between those who fight in solidarity and those who fight for their own, is not unique to Kerala activists. It is reflected in tensions between environmental justice movements and “expanding circle” varieties of environmentalism. The concept of environmental justice was first explicitly put forward by activists in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, many of them people of color, who fought against the disproportionate siting of power plants, incinerators, heavy industry, and expressways in their neighborhoods. Like Sunitha, they grounded their environmentalism in their struggles to protect their own people. From the beginning, so-called mainstream US environmental activists, who were predominantly white and mainly concerned with preserving wilderness from human meddling, marginalized environmental justice movements as not truly environmentalist. In part, they argued that environmental justice movements were too anthropocentric and thus did not fulfill the environmentalist vision for extending moral concern to all beings. On the other hand, proponents of environmental justice challenged mainstream environmentalists for ignoring social inequality and, at times, promoting racism. Against the
charge of anthropocentrism, they pointed to the antihuman tendencies in movements that focus solely on protecting nature from humans, without regard for social justice.\textsuperscript{18}

Today, it may seem that proponents of environmental justice have won this debate decisively. The concept of environmental justice has now spread well beyond its US origins and is used to describe diverse movements around the globe that challenge social inequity in environmental matters.\textsuperscript{19} Meanwhile, many mainstream environmentalist organizations, such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace, have incorporated the principles and rhetoric of environmental justice into their work.\textsuperscript{20} Yet the widespread acceptance of the environmental justice concept does not resolve the underlying conflicts because, as this book shows, environmental justice activism often straddles both sides of the debate.

While environmental justice movements in Kerala are organized by specific affected communities to fight for their own welfare, they are also collaborations between these communities and a range of “outside” actors, including activists committed to more expansive environmentalist agendas. Faiza, Adarsh, and others like them were active supporters of the protestors in Manamur. Faiza, who has an excellent singing voice, helped put out a CD of protest music on behalf of the campaign. Adarsh, as editor of \textit{Kēralīyam}, covered the campaign extensively. Others marched, made posters, gave strategic advice, and generally participated in every aspect of the campaign. The stakes in protesting the factory’s pollution were different for the radical environmentalists, but they were no less active than locals in the fight against the factory. Thus, tensions between fighting for all beings and fighting for one’s own community were, in practice, integral to the collaborative structure of environmental justice movements.\textsuperscript{21}

Locals also felt these tensions in their own lives, pulling them from either side. Fighting for one’s own people could involve difficult choices not unlike those faced by radical environmentalists. For Sunitha, it meant giving less attention to her children’s education and, as a result, watching them struggle in school. For others, it meant forgoing a day’s wages in order to sit in the tent, blockade the factory gate, or join a march through neighboring towns. It meant arrests, court dates, lawyers’ fees, and fines. And it also meant, at times, being willing to incur social risks similar to those experienced by Faiza and Adarsh. By the time Sunitha joined the Action Council, her husband was already a reg-