

Book Review

**Neethi P. (2016) *Globalization Lived Locally: A Labour Geography Perspective*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
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Globalisation, an abstract concept, is a catchall term that is casually deployed to explain the changes all around us – in our consumption patterns, in the ways that cities are developed, in ways people are connected across the world, or the way money flows across borders and territories. It is viewed by some as an extraordinary phenomenon that has ironed out the jagged edges of social, cultural and economic boundaries to make the globe flat! The dominant forces that are seen to be driving these processes are powerful financial institutions and big corporations that are highly mobile, powering through places with their technology, money, chains of offices and global workforces, and in the process reorganising the economic and social lives of people and places. This global landscaping is perceived to be inevitable; each one of us participates in a multitude of ways and degrees to (re)shape it.

In *Globalization Lived Locally: A Labour Geography Perspective*, Neethi P., a labour geographer from India, de-centres some of the metanarratives of globalisation to speak about how ordinary people – in this instance working-class people – participate and reshape the processes of globalisation at the micro level. She does so by drawing from the broader conceptual lens of labour geography which theorises “working class people as sentient social beings who both intentionally and unintentionally produce economic geographies through their actions – all the while recognising that they are constrained in these actions” (Herod, 2001: 16). Framing her theoretical arguments within the subdiscipline of labour geography, Neethi uses empirically grounded case studies from four different worksites located in the southern Indian state of Kerala to show in specific ways how individuals, communities and local institutions not only participate in but actively reshape the workplaces embedded in their local institutions, social and cultural capital.

The book begins with a conceptual framing of labour agency, drawing from the debates in the subdiscipline that originated in the Anglo European Marxist geography scholarship, to offer some explanations on how conceptual terms such as spatiality of work, scale, space and place are deployed in the book to understand the various ways in which relations of production, propelled by the logic of economic globalisation, are played out in particular places. Focusing on Kerala, the book lays out the political economy of the state, both historic and contemporary, tracing the complex relations between the state, capital and labour in shaping the working-class politics of the state. Highlighting some of the unique characteristics of the state – such as its development strategies, its focus on social welfare (education, health, food, social security and land reforms, even though the state has very low levels of income) – the author provides socio-political contexts that shape the global processes at a very local level.

The strength of the book lies in its four case studies which cover four industrial sectors: textiles, electronics, food processing and the port. Although the author doesn't fully explain why

these specific cases were chosen for the study, she explains that the aim was to use these cases to show how the broader labour geography framework can be applied to diverse work settings that are part of global commodity production and consumption chains. Instead of deploying larger structural analysis that is usually capital-centric, the cases foreground ways in which workers at a very local level respond to specific production and labour processes that reconfigure some workplace relations. Some of the cases also show how local institutions such as religious bodies are active participants in shaping the capital–labour relations, replacing state or labour institutions generally responsible for regulating or mediating such relations.

All four case studies offer insights into different kind of workplaces: factory shop floor, work centres, homes and ports. Three out of four case studies focus on women-dominated workplaces that highlight the interplay of patriarchy, religion and capitalist relations to produce particular forms of labour–capital relations. Except for the case study on the port sector workers, dominated by male workers who adopt traditional strategies of labour mobilisation in response to workplace restructuring, the other case studies focus on the everyday forms of resistance by women workers who are far removed from formal organising, trade unions or political affiliations.

The first case study talks about the production relations in an apparel export promotion park. The young women working there were recruited from nearby semi-urban and rural areas, and had similar socio-economic backgrounds; most of them were first-time industrial workers. While some women stayed with their families and commuted to work, others resided inside the park in factory-provided hostels. The case study illustrates the multiple forms of labour control used by management and the responses of the young women. Interestingly, while not being associated with any formal trade unions, the women formed a workers' association (or workers' forum) on the shop floor in response to the restructuring of the firm's ownership that led to a delay of planned wage increases and changes in the number of workdays. The workers led a nine-day strike that finally saw management giving in to the workers' demands for a wage hike and for improved work conditions. While the women maintained that "we don't want our association to be known as a 'trade union', rather, a 'workers' forum'" (p. 84), they actively sought advice on mediation with the management and state from 'mentors' who were men with political party affiliations. These new forms of labour politics, perhaps not uncommon in Kerala or elsewhere (for instance, in electronics Special Economic Zones in Tamil Nadu), are often not considered as working-class politics as they tend to be seen more as opportunistic formations for short-term gains. However, the author argues that these forms need to be viewed as ways in which labour at a very local level confronts and reconfigures capital in specific ways. As the author notes, "the expansion of capital through space remains in a tension-ridden and in an unstable relationship with locality or place" (p. 88).

The next two case studies are in the electronics sector and the food-processing sector. They illustrate key roles played by local institutions such as churches and civic associations not just in recruiting young women for work, but also in maintaining industrial relations, production output and labour control that was deeply embedded in the local social and cultural capital. In the case of the electronics firm, threatened by labour strikes and the possibility of closure, the firm transitioned from an in-house manufacturing site to strategic out-sourcing into smaller worksites in the villages that were run and managed by the local church and its associated welfare organisations. The model deployed direct relations between the firm and the church, where priests and nuns used their influence over the local community to recruit young women from economically poor households (Christians and non-Christians), trained them and then supervised their work for production output. In the context of Kerala, the Catholic Church has always played a major role in providing welfare and social governance outside the state (p. 95). Therefore, the firm's strategy to enlist the church to recruit, retain and manage the workforce was a strategic one to maintain industrial

relations locally. However, as the case study illustrates, even in this case, capital didn't have free run of the space. It had to contend with local-level tensions, negotiations with the church which often over-rode the decisions of the firm-appointed quality controllers to win small concessions for the women. Women, too, taking advantage of their relations with the church, especially the nuns and the priests, used tactical opportunities to get some reprieve from the strict work environment. While these could be seen as "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat, 1997: 57), the author emphasises the relevance of these forms of resistances for the survival and advancement in people's condition of life and labour (p. 108).

In highlighting the role of civic associations such as Kudumbashree (a women's empowerment and poverty eradication programme adopted by the Kerala state government) in mediating relations between the food-processing firm and the workers, this case study illustrates how private capital tried to utilise the already existing local social welfare institutions embedded in the communities to leverage economic gains and also to maintain production and labour relations. The author explains the various ways in which women-run work sheds, sometimes even located inside homes, became a key node in the food processing commodity chain. The complexity of household relations and patriarchal power structures, and the role of the community is shown in interesting ways to understand how social relations of production play out locally. It also illustrates instances where women respond to stressful situations at work by quitting when they find it difficult to challenge the management due to the existing employment relations between their family members and the management. Within these often-constraining structures, the case study shows how women negotiate spaces of labour, create possibilities of cooperation among different work sheds to procure more work orders, raw materials and even get a hike in piece-rate wages during festival seasons.

The last case study, in the port sector, is very different from the others in terms of the nature of workforce (all male), industry and workplace. This case directly addresses the issues of global networks, restructuring and privatisation, and deploys some of the key geographical concepts such as "scales" and workers' "spatial fix" to analyse the various strategies of the private workers to secure their jobs by attaining similar status as permanent workers and achieving higher pay scales. The case illustrates how workers were able to mobilise at different geographical scales and the possibilities that workers have to unionise even as they face global workplace restructuring and increasingly shrinking spaces of unionisation.

In conclusion, the book brings together an interesting set of case studies from Kerala to understand the spatiality of workplaces and the different ways in which social relations in particular locations shape everyday labour politics and, in the process, reconfigure in specific ways global processes that otherwise seem abstract. The only limitation I felt that the book had was in the way the case studies were presented, in disparate fashion that didn't seem to speak to each other. Also, the author didn't make full use of the rich feminist scholarship from the South Asia region to situate and analyse the case studies, especially in theorising the everyday labour practices of women workers. Overall, the book makes a significant contribution to the labour geography scholarship from the Global South in its focus on women workers, which is a big gap in the subdiscipline.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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