Chapter 5

DEVELOPING THE TERRITORIAL COMPLEX

(THE 1950s TO THE END OF THE 1980s)

In post-independence, differing political visions shaped Kuttanad through deeper interventions in to ecology and sharper dialectics between labour and capital. The state policies were impacted by the developments arising from science and technology, entrepreneurship, and labour assertions. The 1970s marked radical technological interventions, which along with ‘green revolution’ inputs dramatically increased production. Trade unionism and land reforms made notable spatial and social changes in the 1970s that altered the situations of extreme impoverishment of the labourers of the previous decades. The above-mentioned processes taking place in the region brought prosperity to the land owners and improved labourers’ lives. But the logic of commercial production gradually eroded the hard-won benefits of the working class. By the end of the 1980s when a number of land owners opted not to cultivate, the labourers were displaced. At the same time, as technological interventions arrested natural water flows, and pesticides flowed in to the water bodies, the livelihoods of fishers and mussel gatherers were detrimentally impacted.

Introduction

1865 had marked the beginning of capitalist relations in paddy production in Kuttanad. This spatial layering restructured the region, and 75 years later a second layering had evolved through the assertions of labour. Spatial layerings are processes that grow to produce marked implications, capable of restructuring the region or territorial complex. In independent India, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, were merged with Malabar, which was part of the Madras Presidency of the British administration, to form the modern state of Kerala in 1956. The territorial complex of Kuttanad, gradually developed new spatial and social processes which were governed by two major aspects of capital, labour and ecology:

(a) In independent India production processes were modernised. Capital-intense technological interventions, and biotechnological and chemical interventions in agriculture were promoted to increase production.
Influenced by Social reforms and Communist movements, peasant resistance was a strong feature in Kerala, and which saw the first Communist government in the world to be elected to power in 1957, with E.M.S.Namboodiripad becoming the Chief Minister of the state. The socialist assertions for a new society were a much more radical reality in Kerala, as compared to the Nehruvian vision of socialism that governed the ideas of independent India.

In different parts of the world the ‘green revolution package’ was introduced by the Ford Foundation and the US government. ‘Its strategy called for the injection of new high-yielding variety seeds...high energy technology in selected favourable areas without any attempt to change the agrarian structure. This means government subsidization of the rich landowners was to be an important feature of the programme’ (Tharamangalam 1981: 29). But the political contests in Kerala, with specific implications for agricultural regions like Kuttanad, were geared to challenge the skewed socio-economic structures. The role of the state was conspicuously impacted by the organised moves of the people. As Communist movement successfully formulated the government through the electoral process, a pro-people role of the state emerged, which often became a compulsion for the non-Left governments as well. Technological and biotechnological interventions were unanimously accepted visions across Congress and Communist political affiliations that governed the state at different times. But the difference in political thrust of the latter lies in the distributional aspects. For instance, the changes brought about in land relation (initiated by the Communists) in Kerala in the 1970s helped social changes like that in education (Shankaran 1982), and in labour relations (Kamalasanan 1999)

In the background of the contexts emerging through the independent nation and through the state of Kerala within it, the regional developments in Kuttanad became more sharply a dialectics of capital and labour, at the same time deeply entrenched in the ecological specificities of the region. The spatial layerings can be identified as:

(1) The 1960s saw the emergence of capital-intense 'green revolution' farming in Kuttanad. At the same time working class assertions continued with KSKTU (Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union), the agricultural labourer's union shaping the production relations in the region.

(2) The 1970s saw technological interventions being made in Kuttanad's ecology with the objective of double cropping to increase production. At the same time, land reforms initiated by the Communists saw land ownership being procured by the tenants.
By the end of the 1980s Kuttanad saw capital withdrawal by entrepreneurs from paddy cultivation, resulting in the stagnation of production and the displacement of labour.

The chapter examines the above-mentioned processes through a framework derived from Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of production abstracted as spatial practice, planned spaces of production, and lived spatial experiences (elaborated in Chapter 3). Their mutual connections help to examine questions like, why in spite of the fact that the 1970s saw increased production as well as land reforms, after a period of two decades, the production relations in the region came to a standstill. What ‘underpinnings’ (to use Lefebvre 1991) led to such developments? Apart from secondary sources, the chapter makes use of interviews of and discussions with senior agricultural labourers.

**Spatial Practice**

Lefebvre (1991) describes spatial practice as processes that secrete the society’s space, which it produces ‘slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it’.

The agricultural labourers of Kuttanad were overwhelmingly constituted by the scheduled castes and the *Ezhavas*. They were addressed with a suffix implying their caste position; say Chiruta *Pulayi*, Chacko *Pulayan*, Sukumara *Chovan*, Saraswati *Chovatti*...and so on. In the 1940s and the 1950s, some spatial practices that secreted and maintained the hierarchy between the landlords/tenants and the labourers, and between men and women are given below:

*The kayals of Chittira, Marthandam and Rani were cultivated by Muricken*. The Thamburan’s son sat on an erumaadom. We were paid for our labour in stalks of grains. Once this was done, he would come down. We women could not go there—we could not even express our opinions. One of our men collected the grains on our behalf. If we or the man dared to say anything we were tied to a pole or a tree. There was no one to ask why we were tied.

*The wages were like 8 or 10 ana*. If we opted for 8 ana it meant that we also got kanni, which was a gruel of barely boiled tapioca, banana stems and chembu with some coconuts added. We had to eat really fast and get back to work. Otherwise the thamburan

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1 References to Murucken are obtained in Chapters 3 and 4 as one of the prominent land reclaimers of Kuttanad

2 Thamburan means the landlord

3 An elevated place built in the midst of the fields from where the farm operations can be observed by the land owner

4 This was the currency of those times. 16 ana constituted a Rupee

5 A tuber
got angry. People who opted for 10 ana got no kanni... they bought tapioca and rice with the two ana.

(from the narrions of Kamala and Janaki, Kainakary village)

The economic marginalisations of the labourers kept them in a perpetual state of poverty, and they maintained themselves and their families at extremely scarce levels of existence:

Janaki: Usually families had 5 to 7 children - If any food was left over, the children would eat them in the morning. Children hardly had any clothes - they wore some sort of nicker... and in those days we did not even have a cloth to cover our breasts\(^6\). We just wore a cloth around the waist. We could not eat well or feed our children properly... Only fourteen days after delivery, I had to go in to the water to collect mussels. Because of the hardships of life, we did all that.

Kamala: That was the way of life then. It was very different from situations of the present day. We could come out of the fields only when the sun went down the coconut palms. Only then did they allow us to stop the labour... They gave us around five bunches of paddy around six in the evening. There were no motors in the ferry as we have them today. So it took time to reach home, and by then we were sleepy. We were too tired to boil the paddy and take the rice out for cooking. These were done in the morning.

The surplus extraction from labourers was such that the reproduction of the working class was maintained at bare levels of survival. The organised efforts of people to change the situations (as discussed in Chapter 4) that continued in to the 1950s saw atrocities by the state through its police force. Kamalasanan (1999) writes on a strong resistance by the landed people to the demands of the labourers. Communists were attacked by the land lords through goondas deployed for the purpose. Kamalasanan himself was badly attacked and escaped death through some personal circumstances. Kamala of Kainakary village recalled the fear with which they spent days and nights, afraid even to step out at night to attend to the calls of nature. The state sought to repress the agitations of the labourers.

In 1957, on the fifth day after coming to power, the Communist government brought in an important ordinance that disallowed the landowners to evict the hutment dwellers from their land. The hutment dwellers (kudikidappukar) lived on land that was extended to them through a by gone system of attached labour. Many landowners evicted the labourers from those spaces. The ordinance in support of the hutment dwellers was passed in the Kerala Assembly as a Bill.

The government also brought in an ordinance that gave tenants’ rights over the lands they were cultivating. Large numbers of tenants were to benefit and landlordism to be deeply impacted. The government also advanced some benefits for the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad (Kamalasanan 1999: 247)... other steps in the sectors of education and

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\(^6\) Even as changes were happening in different parts of Kerala, and women of the lower’ castes started to cover their breasts, there were many places where things had not changed for the ‘lowest’ rungs of society.
transportation favoured the ordinary people (Kamalasanan 1999: 249). All these evolved much resistance from the landed and the upper class of society. Their resistance with involvement of the Congress party and called ‘vimochana samaram’ started in 1959. In Kuttanad they refused to employ the labourers and attacked communist activists. The Land Reforms ordinance gave way to jubilant rejoicing of the working class. But the Central government dismissed the Kerala government in July 1959, after 28 months of Communist rule. This only led to greater violence against the working class by the now well-organised upper class resistance.

**Changes with Intensification of Production**

In the 1970s cultivation intensified through HYV seeds, and fertilizers, and double cropping made possible through the salt water barrier at Thanneermukkom. Kamala and Janaki recalled that as paddy cultivation became more intense, the farm operations resembled the logistics of factories. The labourers hardly had any lunch break and they had to work for long hours. Women were paid to sing while harvesting, a practice incorporated by the farmers to ensure the speed of farm operations that is reminiscent of factory rhythms of working with the machines:

> We got wages for singing...four of us sang till evening– the wage was divided among the four of us, each getting 2 anas, this became an extra earning. When one group got wary of singing, another group would start- like a competition- we would not feel the wariness of time. Work gets done fast- that is why they asked us to sing. Till evening we sang without drinking water. While harvesting the kayals of Marthandam and Chittira we often drank the salty water there and laboured.

Jose (1976), Kamalasanan (1999), and Tharamangalam (1981) have also compared the farm operations of Kuttanad with that of big factories, for instance, Jose (1976) notes that labourers in hundreds or even thousands were put to work in the padashekarams under one or several employers, with the difference that working conditions and remunerations were far worse than in factories. Tharamangalam (1981) notes that Kuttanad's relatively large-scale and profit oriented commercial farming, its large class of wage labourers, and the dissolution of most pre-capitalist forms of relationships between landowners and labourers- point to a relatively high degree of capitalist development (or more accurately, underdevelopment).

**Changes through Land Reforms**

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7 The effort of the Communist party to also organise the farmers could not become successful as the latter perceived that the labourers' union had been targeting them. They united under the banner of the Congress Party.
Kamalasanan, in an interview\(^8\) observed that the rampant poverty and misery of large numbers of people in Kuttanad underwent conspicuous changes in the 1970s, after the land reforms became actualised. Land reforms was a national agenda after independence, that sought to balance out the heavily skewed situations of land ownership in the country. Even as modest efforts were put forward by Congress-led governments, a comprehensive plan came from the communists, which became a legislation in Kerala in 1969. This was passed by the CPM\(^9\)-led United Front Ministry. In the 1970s its implementation was taken up by the succeeding government, which was headed by the CPI and supported by the Congress. Its ground-level implementation was the result of assertions by the poor and rural working class, led by KSKTU:

> Half a million people demonstrated through a rally in Alleppey that asserted on the provisions of hutment dwellers as per the bill. A 'land grab agitation' of 80 days aimed to bring to the attention of the government the availability of surplus land for redistribution. A state-wide strike was called by KSKTU, which saw a huge response. In 1971, 200,000 hutment dwellers asserted homestead rights which saw a counter offensive by landlords with the help of police- 32 people were killed and 50,000 arrested (Narayan 2000: 13).

The campaigns continued up to 1975 and the large land owners were forced to part with the historically accumulated lands of inequality. Eswaran (1990) observes that as elsewhere in the State, in Kuttanad also a new class of tenants turned owners came in to existence through ownership rights in leased- in lands. The largest number of hutment dwellers in the state was in Alleppey district (most of the Kuttanad region falls in this district) and all of them got rights over their homestead land. There has been considerable change in the land holding pattern in Kuttanad after the land reforms. The land relations of Kuttanad prior to the land reforms can be described as a combination of tenancy, peasant proprietorship and large scale owner cultivation. Through reforms the rentier land- owning class disappeared, the peasant proprietors were not affected and the large land owners were impacted through land ceiling. The tenants who were mostly Syrian Christians, Nairs and Ezhavas became owners of the leased-in land. This offered them ample scope to convert farming in to a profitable enterprise’ (Eswaran 1990: 67). But the ideas of co-operative farming put forward by the Communists could not take off.

Land reforms decreased poverty and enabled large sections of people to access education. The life-long binding to the landlord was withering away through land reforms. Children who were earlier bound to the caste, class and gender- based divisions of labour could free themselves and attend school. The issues put forward by social reform movements such as

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\(^8\) Interviewed by me in 2012

\(^9\) In 1964 the Communist Party of India had split into two- the CPI and the CPI(M)
education and social dignity were thus realised at an increased pace after land reforms. Kamalasanan, in an interview observed that these processes were very vibrant in Kuttanad.

Land reform in Kerala was a major radical step that reoriented the spatial and socio-economic structures in different parts of the state. There was a differentiation within the land reform policy between plantations of cash crops and the food-crop regions. The former was exempted from land reforms, implying spatial as well as crop-based differentiation of land reforms. Thus, 'those cultivating plantation crops such as rubber, tea, coffee, cocoa, cardamom, cinnamon and so on were not bound by the limit' (Krishnakumar 2004: 5). The spatial implications meant that the eastern highlands where the cash crop plantations were concentrated was exempted from land ceiling. It is in the central zone of food crop production in which the implementation of land reforms actually took place in Kerala.

The land reforms had very notable impacts on the social spaces and relations in the times to come. Its implications can be understood when if we intersect the social and the spatial structures in Kuttanad. The skewed traditional land holdings as a matter of spatial structure overlapped with the social structures of class-caste and patriarchy. Whereas the upper caste-class men owned most of the region's land, dalits and most of the women (except in the matrilineal traditions) owned no land. In the agricultural practices of the region, upper castes and OBCs were the tenants. With land reforms the tenants obtained land ownership. Dalits who were traditionally not tenants, did not obtain land through the reforms, they only obtained hutments. As for women, Saradamoni (1980) notes that Kerala's admittedly far reaching radical land reforms bypassed married women's independent rights to land through the family route.

**Impacts of Entrepreneurs Leaving Land Fallow**

Land reforms gave way to the transition of a larger section of society to entrepreneurship in agriculture. Whether to invest in cultivation or not was a decision taken on the basis of profits. This was nothing new for Kuttanad, but these fluctuations always impacted the lives of the labourers. By the second half of 1980s such impacts surfaced in Kuttanad as Eswaran's (1990) field observations of Nedumudy village during the period indicate. Withdrawal from paddy cultivation was becoming a trend among the large land holders (the contexts that led to such a development are discussed later in the chapter). Small land holders and the landless people leased in. '...60% of them belong to the category of agricultural labour...agricultural labour households and those engaged in other casual manual labour together form 70% of the tenants' (Eswaran 1990: 70). In contradistinction to the social character of tenancy of the pre-reform days, there is a predominance of the depressed castes as tenants... nearly 35% of the
tenants are *Ezhavas* 13% other low caste Hindus, and the rest caste Hindus and Christians (Eswaran 1990: 73). In situations when land holders opt not to cultivate, he observes that acute unemployment and land hunger of agricultural labourers, largely kept out of the purview of land reforms, looked for possible strategies of survival which in turn created the reemergence of land leasing.

The subsistence nature of cultivation that ensued, operated through contributions of family labour of the tenant households and a higher efficiency which is not indicative of the efficiency of small farmers, but rather a reflection of their economic weakness, or their 'self exploitation' a la Utsa Patnaik, that Eswaran (1990) observes is not indicative of the efficiency of small farmers, but rather a reflection of their economic weakness. Eswaran concludes his study with a note that this stage of subsistence paddy production in Kuttanad signifies a stage of stagnation in agriculture.

The trend of agricultural practices that was set in by the end of the 1980s in Kuttanad was in many ways a spatial layering that went some steps backward as far as the small peasants/tenants and agricultural labourers were concerned. It was a state of intense drudgery for the small tenants in which they had to involve their families also in a vicious circle of intense toil. Kautsky (1988) notes that the overwork of small independent farmers and their families is not a factor which should be numbered amongst the advantages of the small farm even from a purely economic standpoint, leaving aside any ethical or other considerations:

> The small peasants not only flog themselves into this drudgery: their families are not spared either...It takes a very obdurate a admirer of small-scale land ownership to see the advantages derived from forcing small cultivators down to the level of beasts of burden, into a life occupied by nothing other than work... (Kautsky 1988: 244-245)

**Spatial Practices Changed by Labour**

Organised efforts of labour were instrumental in changing social practices in Kuttanad, and not letting it remain as unrealised legislations. This was the case with land reforms and also with a number of other aspects that pertained to the working conditions of labourers. Apart from minimum wages legislations, the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act, 1974 contained stipulations on working hours. Labourers stopped work at 3 in the evening, the time was announced by a trade union member by raising a red flag. In upper Kuttanad sirens were used to announce time. Industrial Relations Committee, with representations from labourers, farmers and the government, negotiated wage increases every year. In Kuttanad, with the entry of tractors, the Committee constituted a plan to provide ploughmen with monetary compensation. Heller (1995) notes that the mobilisation clout of the working class has been inscribed in the laws, institutions and political practices of the state.
Broadly the two basic thrusts emerging from Communist movements and social reform movements were identified by Heller (1995) as that of redistribution and social consumption\(^{10}\). Heller's (1995) study basically examines an important question on the sustainability of concrete material and practical gains of working class mobilisation in a developing capitalist economy. The trend emerging in Kerala necessarily leads to a conflict with the logic of capital accumulation. The importance of production was being emphasised in the CPM, with the state having to equip itself to support the pro-people policies including education, pensions, health, PDS and so on. In the 1980s a shift was happening in the CPM 'that have become the primary advocates of productivity agreements and peaceful labour relations'. This, Heller explains, emerges from the concerns on productivity, and which is seen as a desirable responsibility of the labourers, because they alone can evolve a better labour-management relationship. These trends influenced the regional processes of Kuttanad in the times to come, which would be discussed in Chapter 6.

**Representation of Space**

‘Representation of space’ is described by Lefebvre as the planned space of capital, in which technocrats, scientists, social engineers, and planners play crucial roles. This spatial change implies the modification of the landscape and the ecology to restructure for the needs of the production processes.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, this space in Kuttanad was created through capital-intensive infrastructure by the state that radically altered Kuttanad’s ecology and eased market linkages. The first Five Year Plan (1951-56) gave budgetary importance to agriculture and irrigation, and the second Five Year Plan (1956-61) spelt out the need to increase food grain production in the contexts of the increase in population. In Kuttanad this period saw the planning of technological interventions that was called the 'Kuttanad development project'. It sought to (1) control the saline intrusions through the construction of a salt water barrier that could close its shutters to prevent the sea water from infiltrating in to the Vembanad Lake (2) build a spillway to take the waters of the rivers directly in to the Sea by diverting its natural flow in to the Lake; and (3) to construct a road connecting Alleppey and Changanacherry.

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\(^{10}\) The non-left governments in Kerala have also helped to sustain and broaden these patterns. Dreze and Sen (1989) note Kerala's as the most extensive social network and entitlement programmes in the country. These aspects meant the expenditures on the social sector was high. But the economic production in the state was not sufficiently expanding to sustain the 'Kerala model', which was identified as a problem area by several scholars.
The spillway cum bridge was constructed at Thottappally on NH 47 between Alleppey and Trivandrum. The salt water barrier at Thanneermukkom became actualized only in the 1970s. The road was opened for traffic in 1958.

The A-C (Alleppey-Changanacherry) Road, an important spatial intervention, was an essential condition for the agricultural outputs to reach the market. It was constructed parallel to the human-made A-C canal, which was aimed to drain the flood waters of upper Kuttanad in to Nedumudy and Pallathuruthy lakes near Alleppey. The A-C road is State Highway-11, the first road constructed to pass through Kuttanad paddy fields.

Apart from engineering interventions, biotechnological and chemical inputs were utilized to intensify paddy production. Agricultural Information Services (Government of Kerala), in its publication, 'Krishideepika' in 1961, contextualises the shortage of paddy production in Kerala, even as it produces a number of cash crops that brings in foreign exchange to the country. The production of paddy that was then only 10610 lakh tonnes, it notes was insufficient and hence the need to reorganise existing traditional practices of cultivation, which was sought to be done through:

1. Usage of new varieties of seeds - Regional variations of seeds were suggested for different districts. It recommended farmers to take advice from agricultural officers. There are instructions on treatment of seeds with chemicals so as to get rid of the fungus that infest the paddy plants. There are notes of caution, such as not using the treated seed for food for humans or animals, as they become poisonous through chemical treatment.

2. Treatment of soil - For Kuttanad Punja lands, there are special instructions for neutralising/minimising its acidity through the application of a mixture of lime and basic fertilizers either when the soil is ploughed or just before sowing. As there are differences in soil varieties within Kuttanad, the amounts of lime to be added vary for the kari and kayal lands, and padashekharams

3. Treatment of pests - Apart from the traditional and mechanical methods of getting rid of pests (through the usage of nets and traps) that infest the paddy crops, the new instructions are to use pesticides like foliolde, DDT and endrin.

4. Provisions for loan – The government loans for farmers to buy composts, fertilizers (Rs 40 for an acre) and to buy seeds (Rs 25). Manure, fertilizers, compost and seeds were made

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11 These are the 3 types of farmlands in Kuttanad based on the landscape: (1) kari is land buried with black, coal-like materials (2) kayal refers to the wetland rice fields; and (3) padashekharams or karapadam is the upland rice fields
available as loan from the agricultural department. The loans were to be returned after the harvest, the failure of which would demand an interest of 8%.

(5) Encouragement for a second crop- The government encouraged the cultivation of a second crop in an year: 'For those who cultivate only one crop annually, and who wish to cultivate a 2nd crop, Rs 125 would be given as loan...' (Krishideepika 1961: 69)

In the back cover of the publication, a comparison between the situations of paddy cultivation in India and Japan highlights the benefits of higher usage of fertilizers:

Do you know that on an average the Japanese yield of paddy is 3765 ranthal\textsuperscript{12}. At the same time, India’s average is only 799 ranthal … Japan uses 200 ranthal of fertilizers per acre. India uses only 1.05 ranthal. And that is where the difference lies.

The Thanneermukkom Salt water barrier (TSWB) brought in the most radical production implications in the 1970s, as it made double cropping possible for the first time in Kuttanad. It was built between Thanneermukkom in the south in Alleppey district and Vechur in the north in Kottayam district. A radical deepening of commercial farming in Kuttanad occurred from the mid-1970s, that changed the practices of ecological rejuvenation in Kuttanad’s cultivation in the earlier periods:

The extent of fertility is here measured by the limits of the inundation to which it is annually subject, commencing in June and partly subsiding in September or October. When the labours of cultivation commence, much of this extent is under constant tillage, but as its fertility is found to diminish after a succession of crops, some share is allowed to remain fallow. The space thus left covered with water for a considerable time serves as a reservoir to the neighbouring fields (Ward and Conner 1865: 62).

Such ecological relationships of production that operated for a long time, was abandoned through the new practice of double cropping.

**Representational Space**

Representational space is identified by Lefebvre as the lived spatial experiences of inhabitants, writers and artists. This is the dominated space. For agricultural labourers, the lived spaces of the 1950s and the 1960s were those of immense constraints. Kamala and Janaki note that the rampant floods in Kuttanad worsened their hand-to-mouth existence:

*Kamala:* We brought together some hay and made something like a home...we sheltered it with leaves of the coconut palm and lived under it...cow sheds were any day better. When the water rose we had a tough time. There was no work, so men used to bring boats and gather sand, one basket of which fetched 8 anas. After paying Rs 1.25 as rent of the boat, we procured something to eat with the remaining money. But it was very difficult to cook during floods. We kept three- four boulders as a stove inside the kettu vallam\textsuperscript{13}. The boats

\textsuperscript{12} A unit of measurement of paddy

\textsuperscript{13} country boats with a curved thatched roof
used for carrying sand would be dry. We slept inside the boat. But if it was windy and rainy, even this proved difficult. We tied together banana stalks to make a sort of ferry, spread a mat on it and sat on it till dawn.

Janaki: Every day as I returned home I looked around to see if all my six children were around. One day I saw only five of them; one child was missing. I panicked and called aloud. Gouri, a neighbour, shouted back saying that my son was sleeping in their place. These were the ways in which we managed to bring up children!

The 1960s were times of single cropping (prior to TSWB), the experiences of which are narrated by Kamala:

In the month of Kumbham14, we had no work. We sat idle with nothing to eat. We dug out velichembu (a tuber) with a knife, cleaned and boiled it to be eaten. It is very difficult to eat it because it is scratchy. We put salt and vaalampuly (tamarind) - we would hardly have any spices to add. It was a wild sort of life- somehow we had to sustain ourselves. We drank lots of water to fill our stomachs. Those days there was only a single crop...For Onam (harvest festival of Kerala) we could have a meal...we went to the thamburan – for whom we laboured, who gave us paddy during Onam – it was like a loan. Sometimes they also gave us Rs 2 or so with which we bought vegetables. Rice, saambaar, onion curry and ginger curry – we cut banana leaves and had a meal on it. How satisfying was that meal! ...for which we waited for a whole year!

Kamala described the times when the system of attached labourers had already given way to casual labourers. She said that it was only after double cropping started that the plight of the labourers improved- that they had more to eat. It is evident from the narrations that with double cropping, labourers were employed twice a year. But there are several other processes that simultaneously acted to improve the day-to-day lives of the labourers in the 1970s, that was a period of vigorous trade union movement that successfully pushed for wage increases.

Farmers were jubilant in the 1970s. Mary Fernandez, a senior citizen recalls the rejoicing and the surprise of the farmers in those times, who experienced a magic- like reality of hyped yields. Between 1960-61 and 1983-84, there was a ten- fold increase in total fertilizer consumption in the state. In 1986-87, Kuttanad produced 1834 kg per hectare, which was 7.38% higher than the state average15. But paradoxically, Kuttanad as a space of intense production did not last very long. The input costs became higher as the prices paid by farmers were in excess of the percentage increase in prices received by them. Chattopadhyay and Sasidharan (1994) calculated the ratio of fertilizers to yield for Kerala during the period 1976-80. During the period, fertilizer consumption increased from 30 kg to 40 kg per hectare and the paddy yields increased by 50 kg per hectare. This gives a ratio of 1:5 for fertilizer to yield. Overall this period represents the peak profit achievements. In 1984-6, fertilizer consumption increased from 50 kg to 60 kg per hectare, but the yield increased by only 35 additional kg per hectare. This gives a ratio of 1: 3.5. The authors observe that the decline in the ratio of

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14 Month of Malayalam calendar that falls around February- March of the English calendar
15 State Gazetteer, Vol 3, pp 86
fertilizer to yield indicates a decline in soil fertility. Moreover, there was a fall in the price of paddy. These factors created a decline in the commercial interest in paddy production. By late 1980s there was a fall in net sown area. Eswaran (1990) observes that this situation was also shaped by the increasing involvement of land owners on salaried jobs.

But by the late 1980s as farmers left land fallow, unemployment of labour became rampant in Kuttanad. KSSP (2008) links the state of unemployment and underemployment of labourers to the practice of double- cropping made possible through TSWB. Prior to TSWB, there were local variations in the cropping calendar. When demand for labour in one area completes, it starts in another. So there was no uniform sowing or reaping time for all of Kuttanad. This time-space variation became homogenised through the TSWB, making Kuttanad a similarly timed space for farm operations. This, the document says, deepened unemployment of farm labourers. There were many months when they would now remain unemployed. But this analysis can be contested because the contexts of unemployment are linked to: (1) leaving of land fallow by land holders, whenever profits were not very attractive. This trend was not something new, for instance, early 1940s saw the same trend (2) capital-intensive farming operations which displaced labour. Even though the wages registered increases, the availability of employment became less, so the advantage to the labourers has not been much. Eswaran (1990) traces the situation as 100-120 days of work in 1971 declining to 73 days in 1980 and moving to 80 days in 1985-6. The proportion of agricultural labourers in the total workforce in Kuttanad is much higher than the state average. Kuttanad taluk had the highest proportion of agricultural labourers in 1971 census, that is, 59.96% as against 30.69% for Kerala. It was also higher than the different taluks of Palakkad that represents a prominent paddy growing region of Kerala. Moreover even in the late 1980s two-thirds of the area of Kuttanad was single-cropped: hence 'employment scope within agriculture is very much limited' (Eswaran 1990: 68).

The Role of Literature

The role of literature in the representational spaces of Kuttanad can be traced to two distinct functions. One of this pertains to the portrayal and reflections of the region and another pertains to the promotion of socio-political consciousness among people. Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai's (1912-1999) writings are significant in that it caters to both these qualities. For Pillai who lived in Thakazhi village of Kuttanad, the luxuriant natural situations as well as the social challenges of the region always emerged as the contexts of his short stories and novels. He was conferred the Kendra Sahitya Academy Award in 1958 and the Jnanpith in 1984. His writings become very significant as he delved on the ordinary lives of
Kuttanad. His short stories like 'Vellapokkathil' (meaning 'In the floods') is a vivid description of the difficulties during the annual feature of flooding in Kuttanad. It also brings to mind the narrations of Kamala who described experiences of floods in the 1950s and 1960s. 'Vellapokkathil', written in the 1930s, describes the strong bond between a dog and its master. In general Thakazhi's novels and stories are noted for the depths of exploration of human-nature, man-woman and labour relationships in Kuttanad.

'Randidangazhi', written in 1948, is an exceptionally notable novel of Thakazhi that not only portrayed the lived experiences of labourers in Kuttanad, but also acted as a process to promote spatial practices for a more equal and just world. It gave a strong political urge to ensure the economic rights of ordinary labouring people. Tharamangalam (1980) and Jose (1980) had observed the literacy levels of Kuttanad as one of the chief factors that helped in the emergence of agrarian radicalism in Kuttanad. The very important role played by a number of writers in Malayalam that also aided the emergence of a strong movement of theatre, acted as catalysts for socio-political change. Govinda Pillai (2004), Ayyappa Panicker (2007), K.K.N.Kurup (1998), E.M.S.Namboodiripad (1990), Rajeevan (1999) and several others have extensively written on the role played by literature in enhancing socio-economic change in Kerala.

**Water Transportation**

For Kuttanad with its immense networks of water bodies, and its human-made canals, the most feasible and naturally enabling transportation was by water. Canoes, boats and ferries of various sizes, had been innovated for various purposes. Canoes and ferries were used for simple short distance transportation, say to cross a canal or river, for agricultural labourers to travel to the kayal zones that lie at a distance from places of residence, for vendors selling goods, for students going to school and colleges, for people going to the town of Alleppey, to the market, to churches and temples, and so on. Traditionally grains and other goods were transported from one place to another in kettuvallam\(^{16}\), which is a large sized boat with a roof covering to protect the goods from rains. Around 50 years ago ferries started to be fitted with motors. Rich people started to own private motor boats, comparable to the role of private cars. These have seating capacities of 10 to 12 or more, with a driver's cabin in the front and a deck on top. The Kerala State Water Transport Corporation has large motor boats, that can carry around 50 people, plying as public transport system in the region. These services are aligned to boat jetties from where people alight or board.

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\(^{16}\) It is this pattern that has in contemporary times been modified and utilised to build the tourist house boats
Across years, as the territorial complex became more developed through the production processes, the water transportation was impacted by both planned and unplanned outcomes. There was a trend of moving away from water-dependent transportation to land-dependent ones. As discussed above in 'Represented spaces', the planned effort for faster transportation, a marked feature of commercial production, was seen in the construction of the A-C road by the end of the 1950s. Marx had noted that capital must on one side strive to tear down all spatial barriers of intercourse and conquer the whole world for its market, 'it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time' (Marx 1857-61: 473) – to reduce to the minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another:

The more developed the capital, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time (Marx 1857-61: 473).

The unplanned impacts on water transportation came about as an after-effect of the 'green revolution'. The fertilizers that were utilised for farming mixed with the waters and flowed into the canals, rivers and lakes of Kuttanad. These acted as nutrients that accelerated the growth of water hyacinth or what is locally called 'African payal', water weeds that float in the waters. It interfered with the everyday lives of people that was in a number of ways dependent on the water bodies. One of the major impacts was on the water transportation. Boats and canoes found it difficult to ply the waters, and in many sectors of the water networks, water transportation came to a standstill.

**Non-Farm Geographical Divisions of Labour**

The story of region formation of Kuttanad, built around the primacy of paddy production, evolved prominently to shape the landscape, the society and the economy of the region, they were also making spatial relations with other geographical divisions of labour which existed as peripheral activities. In Chapter 4, it was observed that these branches of production had maintained reciprocal and complementary relationships with paddy cultivation. But the intensification of paddy production through green revolution and technological interventions implied radical changes in the ecology of the region. This gave way to ecological impacts, most strongly evolving in the water bodies of Kuttanad. TSWB, by controlling the waterflow between the Sea and the Lake, interfered with the breeding habits of fish and prawns, which moved from the saline to the fresh water, or vice-versa, during the breeding season. The pesticides that flowed out from the farms, detrimentally impacted the biotic life of the water bodies of Kuttanad. As the shutters of TSWB remained closed for most parts of the year, there was a process of stagnation of the waters and accumulation of the chemical pollutants. These
processes detrimentally impacted the various non-farm geographical divisions of labour that were mostly based on the Vembanad Lake:

Fishing in the fields - The spraying of pesticides brought forth detrimental impacts on the fish and other aquatic life. The 'fish harvest', described in Chapter 4, completely disappeared in Kuttanad.

Fishing in the Lakes and rivers - Describing Kuttanad of 1950-70, Chandy (2014: 347) writes '...each and every family used to catch fish from their own ponds and canals'. For many other people, fishing in the Lakes and rivers of Kuttanad was a means of livelihood. Nets were used to fish and the catch was sold in the immediate locality as well as in nearby markets. Pearl spot (called karimeen) and prawns of Kuttanad are quite well-known and in demand. But the ecological impacts on the water bodies of Kuttanad led to a decline in fish production. Dead fish floating on the waters of Vembanad Lake was a widely experienced and reported phenomenon.

Mussel gathering – TSWB that blocked the saline infiltration detrimentally impacted the growth of mussels. It is generally estimated that the mussels in the Lake have declined as compared to earlier times, and just as in the case of fish, mussels were impacted by pesticides.

Duck rearing – There are no reports on substantial implications on duck rearing, even as the symbiotic relationship (described Chapter 4) must have declined during the period through decline in cultivation.

Toddy tapping- Toddy tappers, as in the case of dalit and other agricultural labourers (who were not tenants) and unlike the Ezhava tenants doing paddy cultivation, did not obtain cultivation lands, but around 10 cents for hutment. The advancement in education after land reforms and the notable participation in trade unionism have been exceptionally beneficial to the Ezhava as a caste group. Among the peripheral productions of Kuttanad, toddy tapping was perhaps least peripheral because of it being an agricultural-based activity. It operated on spaces not overlapping with paddy, but grown along the fringes of paddy fields.

**Conclusions**

The production of space (Lefebvre 1991) as planned space, spatial practice, and lived spatial experiences was utilised to examine the development of the territorial complex of Kuttanad. The separate examination of space in this manner becomes handy as an analytical tool, but these spaces operate in an interlinked manner, and hence the need to bring them together in synthesis.
With the pro-people impacts on state policy having been incorporated into the institutions of the Kerala state from the second half of the 1950s, its role became prominent in both the represented or planned space as well as in the transitions of spatial practices through pro-people legislations. On the other hand, the organised efforts of the people impacted the state policies as well as their actualisation on ground. Thus as compared to many other parts of the country, the relationship between capital and labour in Kerala saw the state showing a far more vibrant mediating role.

In Kuttanad the 1970s saw radical transformation on all aspects of production of space. The state planned and executed technological and other capital-intensive inputs, which through ecological transformation of Kuttanad drove the region towards a very intensified phase of commercial paddy production. In the same decade, the state also actualised a pro-people land reform, actualised on ground by the Left-political trade unions. The lived experiences of the people in terms of economic and social prosperity improved through this spatial intervention. The impacts on lived experiences were also an after-effect of welfare measures of the state that prominently included education, health and food security. Heller (1995) had focused on the question that under what circumstances can such gains, which necessarily conflict with the political and economic logic of capital accumulation, be sustained? It was precisely such a practical crossroad experienced by the Left government in Kerala that saw the CPM in the 1980s take a stand that its trade unions should co-operate in the matters of production, which is a necessity for continuing the pro-people policies.

But ironically all the processes mentioned above, evolved an anticlimax of production in Kuttanad in the end of the 1980s, when many farmers withdrew from farming. Education could also have played some role here, as Eswaran (1990) notes that many salaried people opted not to cultivate. But in the heart of the matter was the inherent nature of capitalist relations of production itself. This time-space process of Kuttanad can be analysed through ecological linkages of declining soil fertility, economic linkages of insufficient profits, and the social linkages of labour assertions and wage hikes. All these aspects had actually emerged as contradictions in the production relations of Kuttanad. An overarching commercial ethos can be understood from the nature of capital itself:

There appears here the universalizing tendency of capital which distinguishes it from all previous stages of production, ... which is founded not on the development of forces of production for reproducing or at most expanding a given condition, but where the free, unobstructed, progressive and universal development of the forces of production is itself the presupposition of society and hence of its reproduction; where advance beyond the point of departure is the only presupposition. This tendency which capital possesses, but which at the same time, since capital is a limited form of production, contradicts it and hence drives it towards dissolution- distinguishes capital from all earlier modes of production and at the same time contains this element, that capital is posited as a mere point of transition (Marx Grundrisse: 473).
The calculation of profit rests on the balance between inputs and outputs that plays a crucial role in decision-making in commercial farming. By the end of the 1980s, the balance was not favourable to the farmer through the escalation of input costs on one side, and the declining outputs in terms of fertilizer-yield ratio coupled with low prices of paddy on the other side. Government subsidies for inputs like fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, and electricity for dewatering were available, but the expenditure on wages for labourers is something that cannot be kept on par with other input costs. Wages not only represent an issue of contention of capital, but are also the fulcrum of social space and power, which is nuanced through caste and gender. Hence in contradistinction to other inputs in agriculture, labour holds socio-spatial, economic and political implications. The farmer singles out this aspect especially when it is strongly contested through trade unions and because it often confronts him socially through the withering away of the traditional body languages of submission. As a farmer observed: 'Things have changed. The earlier relationship between the farmer and the agricultural labourer, which had operated as two sides of a coin, has gone. Today the labourers have no humility. There is only a relationship based on the amount of money you can pay them.' Hence in commercial farming and where labourers are organised, this aspect becomes complex. In Kuttanad even as trade unions bargained for and attained higher wages, the benefits could not reach them because the labour days declined drastically due to capital-intensive farm operations and the practice of farmers leaving land fallow whenever profit proportions were not favourable. An important feature recorded by scholars is also the tension emerging between the new landlords (erstwhile tenants) and the labourers. Former tenants who obtained marginal sized holdings came in direct conflict with their former allies (the labourers). Kannan (1988) observes a class standoff in which the new land holders shifted to the Congress political affiliations.

A spatial and ecological impact of the zeal for increasing profits, as also happened in other parts of the world, was the neglect of ecological implications. This not only impacted cultivation itself, but also detrimentally impacted fishing and mussel gathering from the Vembanad Lake. These activities that produced important sources of protein in the traditional food habits of Kuttanad and were the means of livelihoods of a number of subaltern people, became seriously threatened through ecological deterioration of the water bodies.

It is true that politically committed processes of socio-spatial changes happened in Kuttanad from the 1950s onwards. A very skewed land distribution pattern, and a very unequal socio-economic space operating through the institutions of caste and patriarchy, was the situation of Kuttanad in the 1950s and the 1960s. Social reforms and Communist movements managed to pull up these inequalities and deprivations. But at the intersections of caste, class and patriarchy, there are many people whose socio-economics still yearn for change. It is not as
though the overall impacts of changes have not impacted them. But there are still miles to go. As brought out by Kodoth (2004) and Devika (2002) the progress made by social reforms in Kerala went hand in hand with the patriarchal norms and values. The subordination of women and dalits are issues that would be examined in the forthcoming chapters that deal with contemporary Kuttanad. From the 1990s, the country entered a new phase of capitalist intensification through liberalisation- globalisation. Here the questions raised by Heller (1995) on the sustainability of pro-people state mechanisms; as well as the questions of caste, class and patriarchy are bound to be challenged. The continued processes of contestations and negotiations in the region formation of Kuttanad in neoliberalism would be examined in Chapters 6 and 7.