Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The thesis introduced Kuttanad from the popular imaginations of place as 'scene', and moved to its socio-economic fault lines narrated by its people. Thus place as 'scene', that is consciously promoted by the tourism industry, becomes unveiled as 'region' embedded in processes of tensions and negotiations. The 'region', is amenable to analysis and synthesis because it is a spatial entity that is perpetually made through socio-economic, ecological and cultural processes. It becomes a 'territorial complex' developed through the relationships of ecology, capital and labour. This gives way to particular ways of life, struggles and lived experiences.

In concluding the thesis, the present chapter attempts to draw upon the major findings, to reflect on their interlinked implications, offer a few suggestions, take stock of the theoretical grounds that had been employed, and also identify gaps that can be taken up for further research.

The Regional Framework

The territorial complex or region as a theoretical framework was utilised in the study of Kuttanad. It is not simply a matter of concreteness that enriches the study, but the framework as capable of looking at inter linkages of concrete processes. The historical geography of Kuttanad was examined as a necessary exercise that gives insights in to the various processes that shape a region. The specificity in Kuttanad emerges from the ways in which the state, capital and the organised efforts of people push for change. These efforts and their mutual balances give rise to 'spatial layerings' that have impacted the region at particular times and continue to assert their influences into the developments in contemporary Kuttanad. For instance, new spatial layerings evolve through the processes of neoliberalism.

The role of the state has been, since the mid 19th century, playing an important role in the structuring and restructuring of Kuttanad as region. These include the impacts of colonialism, the Princely rule, and the independent state. In independent India, Kerala had politically
marked a different trajectory from the national thrusts of socialism by the Nehruvian government. This was shaped by the social reform movements in Travancore in the first half of the 20th century, and the Communist movements that emerged a couple of decades later. These extended major influences on building pro-people policies and legislations in the modern state of Kerala. These have evolved through a dialectical relationship between the organised efforts of the people and the state.

The ecological relations in Kuttanad are indicated by the various geographical divisions of labour such as paddy cultivation, fishing, mussel gathering, toddy tapping and duck rearing. The social relations of production operate through caste, class and patriarchy, which is hierarchically well defined in the case of paddy cultivation than in the other branches of production. The upper castes (Brahmins, Syrian Christians and Nairs), the OBCs (mostly Ezhavas) and the dalits (Pulayar, Parayar) represent the caste- hierarchy in paddy production. The other traditional sectors are occupied by OBCs (Ezhava, Dheevar) and dalit Christians. Caste and gender hierarchies are relatively less within these sectors as compared to paddy production.

The regional frame has helped to examine the nuances of and the combined impacts of the ecological, economic and social relations in Kuttanad. These inform why the region was shaped in particular ways and not in others. This would not have been possible if the study focused only on one sector like paddy cultivation, or on one aspect like the economy. The mutual relationships of economy, ecology and society was interpreted, and their political consequences could be derived. Another important and significant contribution of the regional frame is of examining the inter linkages of caste, class and gender. If any of these socio-economic categories were studied by itself, the specific situations of social relations emerging in Kuttanad could not have been analysed. Thus the nature of regional specificity becomes a function of various inter linkages operating at the concrete level of the region.

As the regional frame rests on the derivation of a large number of relationships simultaneously operating across time and space, the theoretical premises become obviously complex. The central question being based on understanding 'space', three main theoretical perceptions have been of great import in the thesis. One is of Anuchin (1960) who emphasised the interconnections between the ecological and the social, the second one is of Lefebvre (1991) who emphasised the ways in which capital produces space in society, and the third one is of Herod (2001) who emphasised the importance of labour, and not only capital, in shaping landscape and spaces. These theorisations have been immensely useful in deciphering the complex nature of production of space in Kuttanad. Some of the important issues emerging from the regional frame of analysis of Kuttanad are discussed below.
Single Cropping and TSWB

Till TSWB became operative in the 1970s, there was a practice of only a single annual crop in Kuttanad. This was the *punja* crop, and hence Kuttanad was known as 'punja land', whereas other parts of Kerala had developed double cropping long ago. The first crop is harvested in March. The second crop is relatively less capital intensive because pests are not so abundant in June-July when the sowing takes place. But the risk factor in the second is quite high because of the frequency of rains happening during or near the harvest times, in September-October. There is a growing trend of not engaging with the second crop. In present times, large farmers are seen to be cultivating only one crop annually. The large scale cultivation being done in the *kayals*, is the zone of greater risk, where the farmers prefer single annual cropping.

In the contexts of farmers reverting to a single annual cropping, the debates on TSWB can be opened up again to seek the best ecological and economic solutions. But at the same time any change would need to be checked for consequences of economic marginalisations. If TSWB is opened more frequently, it would be beneficial for the fishers and mussel gatherers of Vembanad Lake. But at the same time, it would impact several small and medium farmers of the *padashekkharams* who continue with double farming. But often small farmers are also seen to be engaging only with *punja* cultivation. They have other economic activities like running tea stalls and small hotels, that annually sustain them. There seems to be a convergence on Kuttanad again emerging as a land of *punja* cultivation only. This also emerges as a suggestion in SCR, 2007. This was also suggested by Thomas Isaac, from the responsible position of a Minister of Kerala a few years ago. Even as the trend is getting well-defined, its implications and reasons vary. For the big farmers, the risk factor in the second crop is what urges them to stick to *punja* cultivation only, which is today hugely profitable. For the small farmers, who engage with other economic activities (in which the family involvement is also often seen), it makes sense not to cultivate the more risky second crop. In SCR, minimising the farmers' loss is one way of sustaining the farmers' interest in cultivation, that in turn would build a sustainable base for tourism. For Thomas Isaac, it is a rethinking on TSWB, and perhaps build another crop calendar, rejuvenate fishing and attempt to rebuild Kuttanad's natural and economic diversities. He wants to take in to count all the social costs that were entailed through TSWB.

From the field it was gathered that the opening of TSWB would lead to the flooding of many places during the monsoons. The second crop is sown in June- July and the shutters of TSWB are kept closed. Farmers say that if the second crop is abandoned, even then it would be required to dewater the *padashekkharams*, to avoid flooding of many areas of habitation. This
aspect does not apply to the *kayals*, which is strongly emerging with the pattern of single cropping today. So there are many aspects of ecology and economy as well as of day-to-day life experiences that need to be taken count of. Isaac's proposition underscores the need for long term and sustainable solutions, which can be done through consensus from multiple sections of people. This becomes very significant in the region-specific situation of one group's benefits through TSWB being harmful to another group. But if the state has the political will and commitment as aspired by Isaac, where the last person's welfare is be taken care of, then that is a feasible option, but one that would require the coming together of a number of socio-economic groups—fisher-folk, labourers, toddy tappers, farmers, women, dalits, tourism workers and entrepreneurs, trade unions, environmentalist and so on.

**Duck Rearing as a Special Geographic Division of Labour**

Duck rearing, even as it has been a part of Kuttanad's geographic division of labour for long, was not necessarily operated by local people. This economic activity had a strong ecological linkage, as it took advantage of the post-harvest spatial situation, that can be described as fields that contained water, fallen grains and small fish, all ideal for duck rearing. The seasonal movements of the duck rearers from adjoining areas into Kuttanad, is comparable to the seasonal migration of cattle grazers of Rajasthan to the post-harvest fields of neighbouring states. The scale of movement and operation from Rajasthan is much larger.

The duck-rearing activity does not have a strong caste linkage. It is more like an enterprise like poultry being done by persons any where. It does not necessarily link deeply with the social division of labour, and is not much impacted by the NL restructuring happening in Kuttanad. In fact duck rearing has only benefited in the contemporary times. There is no change in the post-harvest spatial prospects for the duck rearer, who still seasonally rents the space. The duck rearer of today does not actually roam around with the ducks, he is the owner of the flock of birds, who are taken care of by labourers on wages. NL has expanded the demand of duck meat because of accelerated tourism.

**The Decline of Coconut Palms**

The drastic decline of coconut palms in Kuttanad can be traced to a combination of ecological and economic factors. The co-existence of paddy and coconut had been a strong feature of Kuttanad's farming. But after the revival of paddy cultivation in the early 2000s, the practice of farming became focused on paddy alone. As the revival took on a turn of large scale leasing in, especially of *kayals*, coconut palms did not obtain much attention. As discussed in Chapter 6, this implies the loss of local production of an important source of food, oil and wood. It also means the loss of economic engagements such as toddy tapping, and several
other engagements linked to the differing usages of the palm. The intense commercial thrusts
of cultivation, that has accelerated in NL, does not seem to be favouring the rejuvenation of
coconut palms in Kuttanad, which do not follow the monoculture, plantation style of
operation as in other parts of Kerala. So with the ever-increasing waves of changes driven by
the logic of capital, region-specific patterns that do not jell with large operations of scale,
seem to be abandoned.

**Fishing Facing a 'Spatial Catch'**

The symbiotic relationship between farming and fishing was completely destroyed after the
TSWB was built and 'green revolution' practiced in Kuttanad. The redefined relations
developed in such a way that what is beneficial for agriculture became harmful for fishing.

Fresh water fishing and mussel gathering could be immensely promoted if TSWB be opened
more frequently. But the sort of support that farming had been able to procure from the state
is unfortunately absent in the case of fishing. This stands as a contradiction to the experiences
of marine fishers, whose organised struggles could procure state supports. The sort of
powerful articulations and organisations of marine fisher folk of Kerala and their national
and international solidarities with fish workers, had challenged the entry of international
corporates in to the national waters. Such successful mobilisations have not happened in the
case of Vembanad inland fishers.

There has been and continue to be organised resistance by the fishers of Vembanad. But they
face a territorial catch: their prospects can be protected only by more frequent opening of
TSWB, which is detrimental for paddy cultivation, on which capital, the state and the
economy are focussed. The Vembanad fishers are caught in a regional dilemma that is
ecological, economic and also reflective of socio-economic power inequalities. With political
organisations and trade unions being strongly developed in the farming sector, the balances
of political thrusts tilted to be not very favourable to the fishers and mussel gatherers.

**The Social Confronts the Spatial: Women and Dalits**

In a careful examination of social nuances, one can sense the continuing and underlying
tensions between the upper caste-class and dalits. This prevents them from coming together in
the production processes of the traditional sectors as well as the new and emergent tourist
sector. The *Ezhavas* who are in a middle position in the caste hierarchy, have after land
reforms, become more affiliated with the upper caste-class in the economic and socio-political
spheres, and are tenants, land owners as well as labourers. The isolation of the dalits have
been defined through this process. There is a social geographic problem here, something that
was sensed and written about in the initial field visits, when every labourer in every economic activity that I met happened to be dominantly of the *Ezhava* caste. By the end of the study as this trend is well established, it brings to fore the exclusion of dalits that needs to be problematised. Even as dalit labour has historically been the crucial aspect of land reclamation and paddy cultivation in Kuttanad, and even as pro-people policies impacted the region, the ownership of land did not sufficiently reach their hands. This spatio-social vulnerability is utilised by capital in neoliberalism, and we see a process of dalit dispossession from the lands.

Caste based reservations have definitely done a relatively good job in South India as compared to the North. Education has helped them to shift from the primary sectors, in which they were traditionally exploited. It is such shifts that are perceived to be containing the potentials of liberation by dalit organisations. But this inevitably means, as Kuttanad shows, the uprooting of this section of people from the ecological relations, and from the social geography of the region itself. This uprooting is enhanced by neoliberal processes of acquiring land for capital and of labour displacement. At the same time, it is also a process of ideologies of dalit liberation. The social mobility of the dalits thereby becomes a process possible only by moving out of the region for economic sustainability. Thus whereas social mobility of the OBCs happened on site, dalit social mobility happens through displacement, through a process of rejecting geography built traditionally by them (in a highly exploited situation whatsoever).

On the situations of women in Kuttanad, they need be understood in conjunction with caste. The dalit women, like their men counterparts seek a spatial movement away from the traditional employments that have been exploitative. But with relative economic prosperity of the family, the spatial movement of *Ezhava* women have been away from economic occupations and in to the family. Here we see a strong patriarchal implication of shrinking of socio-economic spaces of women. The social confronts the spatial in opposite directions for the dalits and the women. The implications of tourism in the intersections with patriarchy would need a more extensive study to be able to arrive at sufficiently nuanced understandings. There are indications of sex-tourism as well as of women's participation in small sales like hotels in such parts of the region where the tourists ply the water bodies. But a deeper examination is required on how patriarchal norms intersect in the region in neoliberalism.

### Neoliberal Experience in Kuttanad

NL, implying the accelerated spatial moves of capital, has reoriented labour and evolved environmental discourses in Kuttanad. These pave way for an active and fast-paced process
of restructuring of the region through changed relations between environment, capital and labour. The NL processes impact the geographic and social divisions of labour. It recreates the hierarchical relationship between different geographic divisions of labour in Kuttanad, and at the same time recreates the hierarchies of class, caste and patriarchy.

The NL experience in Kuttanad has been a process of elimination of labour from surplus production. The patterns of land ownership and traditional occupations place dalits and women labourers in a comparable situation. They have been displaced completely from agriculture and have no employment options in tourism. Paddy cultivation and tourism restructure the region through capital accumulation from both the activities being vested in the hands of upper class-caste and men.

Through the restructuring of geographic divisions of labour, all the secondary branches of production like fishing and toddy tapping are drastically declining. This implies the occupational displacement of Ezhava and Dheevara communities (OBCs). Their next generation already seek other economic options. For Ezhavas and comparable castes who were tenants in paddy cultivation, the land reforms of the 1970s had brought major changes as they acquired land. As for the labourers in paddy cultivation, they have been displaced, and the last generation (above 40 years of age) attend to the meagre farm labour available. Harvesters are operated by non-local persons.

**Environmental Discourses in NL**

Environmental discourses in NL voice conservation of nature, and also promote its active commodification. In tourism that has a neoliberal thrust at the global and national-regional levels, these characteristics of environmental discourse is very evident. In the process of reification through tourism, 'environment' becomes on one hand a commodity for capital and on the other, an embedded reality for people living in Kuttanad. 'Special Zones' which are a marked feature in NL has already made a foothold in Kuttanad as some areas have been declared as 'Special Tourism Zone'. The NL recommendations for Kuttanad through SCR, 2007, seeks the whole of the region being declared as 'Special Agricultural Zone'. If materialised, this holds the potentials to erode democratic rights enabled through the strengthening of local body administration. The enclaving of spaces for Special Zones also cuts down people's relations with the environment, marking a divergence between environment in capital's discourse and in people's problems in everyday lives. The latter evolves from the lived experiences of people in the region, who look for livelihood solutions, that are economically and ecologically sustainable.
People's Struggles in Contemporary Kuttanad

Resistance from labour is not emerging as it did in earlier times. There are not many people today in Kuttanad who can be categorised as 'agricultural labourer'. This situation began to emerge from the end of the 1980s, when paddy cultivation declined. There was no work available and labourers must have had a tough time, some of them trying to do subsistence cultivation by leasing in land, and obtaining some relief from the welfare measures of the Kerala state. The younger generation therefore did not become agricultural labourers. By the time paddy cultivation reinstated itself from the early years of 2000, there was no agricultural labourers available from the younger generation. Hence even as the NL impacts of capital have been tantalising in Kuttanad's paddy cultivation in contemporary times, the implications on the lived experiences of people are not of stark and widespread poverty as happened in the 1940s. Moreover in the 1980s CPI(M) changed its strategies towards lesser labour assertion and towards pro-production.

It is suggested that there is need to politically explore the potentials of legislations like 'The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2008', through which tenancy can be procured by the unemployed labourers. Women like Thankam could then become cultivators. Obviously there are challenges like the capital requirements for farming, and the reluctance of land owners to lease out to dalits, women and the poor. Competitions are also huge, especially as capital is seeking more lands as commercial paddy cultivation has again become a lucrative business in Kuttanad. But even as regional contexts are different, there are innumerable examples of 'Kudumbasree' women having successfully ventured in to cultivation (especially of vegetables) in other parts of Kerala. The concerted efforts of KSKTU, civil society groups, dalit and women's organisations need to work on increasing spaces for labour, women and dalits.

As compared to the agrarian movements of the past, the struggles against tourist encroachments in contemporary Kuttanad have smaller scales of operation, even as neoliberal capital operations are geared up for large scales of impact. But the solidarity in spatial struggles of the Left-political and environment groups seen in Kuttanad require special mention, as a very encouraging scenario that realises the struggles of labour and of environment as two sides of the same coin. It emerges from the relationships of capital with environment and labour. It is perceived that such recognitions across dalit, Left-political, environmental and women's groups need to be strengthened so as to articulate and enrich the reclaiming of social spaces in Kuttanad for labour, dalits and women.
Revisiting Theory

Revisiting the theoretical premise elaborated in Chapter 2, it is evident that NL is realigning the geographic and social divisions of labour in Kuttanad:

(a) Due to ecological specificities, paddy cultivation continues in Kuttanad, in contradiction to replacement by cash crops in NL, as discussed by Patnaik (2012). But within the paddy sector, the relations of production has changed radically in favour of capital, and to total displacement of labour. This is a marked NL trend, in which the spatiality of capital has increased, and it captures the spaces of production to the extent of keeping labour requirements to a very bare minimum.

(b) Tourism as a geographic division of labour has a policy thrust in NL, and rationalises through environmental discourses, and spatially expands for larger scales of operations. This synchronises with the nature of rationalisations of capital on environment, elaborated by Bridge (1992) and Harvey (1996; 2010). As Bridge (1992) observes, the discourses on environment is trapped within the capitalist frame. This is evident in the enactment of Special Tourism zone, and in the aspirations of SCR, 2007.

(c) Paddy cultivation and tourism together occupy the primacy of production in Kuttanad, and this is largely due to the ecological situations that link them at the concrete level of the region. Tourism in Kuttanad is dependent on the greenery borne of paddy cultivation. The shared primacy of the two geographic divisions of labour emerge from the regional specificity, and points to the fact that even as NL trends can be sketched at broad levels, capital and labour plays out in specifically regional ways, in which ecology has an important role to play. This is something that was elaborately theorised by Anuchin (1960).

(d) The reordering of social relations in NL, theorised by Harvey (2003: 2006: 2010), is happening in Kuttanad. There is a consolidation of class-caste-patriarchy. Harvey had noted that in NL, class reconfiguration need not necessarily follow the traditional lines, but in Kuttanad, it is more or less the reinstatement of traditional power patterns.

(e) Herod (2001) points out that the ability to shape the landscape's physical form are reflections of as well as sources of power. This emerges very clearly in NL through the reassertions of class- caste-gender in Kuttanad's social geography.

(f) The spatial movement of dalits from the traditional sector of agriculture in which they were employed, is partly an outcome of their own resistance to traditional oppressions. Herod (2001) emphasised that different groups of workers often pursue different spatial agendas.
This means that the resolution of their geographic praxis will bring with it different outcomes for the landscapes of capitalism.

(g) In interpreting the impacts of NL on dalits, the theoretical positions are polarised. The spatial marginalisation of dalits in Kuttanad strengthens the positions of Jal (2014), Gathade (2013) and Teltumbde (2001). Dalits have largely moved in to non-traditional sectors for employment. Within the region, new employment options in NL accelerated through tourism, do not absorb dalits. So the arguments of Prasad and Kamble (2013) do not actualise. Wherever survival opportunities in the modern sectors are being possible, it requires spatial displacement from Kuttanad.

(h) Paradoxically, the economic prosperity and social mobility of castes/families have systematically reduced the spaces of women. This shrinkage of women’s spaces mean loss of their economic independence, and of their mobility in the world outside their homes. Their activities being confined to the patriarchal norms of nurturing the family. Hence as variously reflected by Saradamoni (1983), Kodoth (2004), Devika (2002) and Devika and Sukumar (2006), it is derived that ‘progressive’ moves in society/family like social reforms, land reforms, and economic prosperity have all impacted women in Kuttanad by making their spaces of engagement with the world smaller.

**Some Gaps in Research**

Boat makers of Kuttanad form an important category of geographic and social division of labour in Kuttanad. But this has not been included in the thesis. This omission was not consciously done. But the innumerable processes of Kuttanad already taken in to count were quite large, and this became left out. But by the end of the study, it is felt that this important aspect needs to be taken up for research. It can become an agenda for further research on Kuttanad.

The boat makers have traditionally made ferries and small country boats for everyday use in Kuttanad. They also made the snake boats, called *chundan vallom* in Malayalam, for which Kuttanad is well known. The snake boat which originated for the usage of swift movements for warfare in the times of erstwhile princely rule, later transited to being used for boat races. It developed to become an important competitive sport item during *Onam*, the harvest festival of Kerala. It therefore became an added tourist attraction during that time of the year. Wealthy families owned such boats in the past and these are now owned by 'boat clubs' who pool in money to collectively spend on the maintenance of the boat and the hiring of people for rowing the boat for the annual competition. The rowers of snake boats are entirely men, with a captain standing at the centre of the boat to enhance a rhythm of synchronised rowing. The
captain taps the boat at the centre with a wooden pole and sings 'boat songs' which are repeated by the others. The songs have a rhythm and enthusiasm that creates an ambiance of cooperation to win, like:

*O tititaara tititai tititai taga tai tai tom*

There were separate competitions for women rowers on smaller boats. These were not snake boats, but boats with curled tips called *churulan vallam*. But dalits were exempted from participation in boat races. They could not become boat rowers.

Many film songs have popularised the thrill and beauty of Kuttanad's festival season and its boat races. Nehru was very thrilled watching a boat race of Kuttanad, and the annual boat race came to be named after him, as 'Nehru trophy' and the area in which it is conducted has attained the name of 'Nehru trophy ward'.

The boat making industry of Kuttanad could have ebbed because of the decline in water transport as roads and bridges were making road transport more prominent. As mentioned earlier, the African paayal growing abundantly because of the fertilizers flowing into the waters from the fields, blocked water transport in many places of Kuttanad. But since the 2000s the emergence of house boat tourism in the Lake gave way to a boost in the boat making industry.