ABSTRACT

Kuttanad is most popularly known as the 'rice bowl' of Kerala. Situated in South Central Kerala, it was part of the erstwhile Princely state of Travancore. It is unique for its ecological settings, its historic relations of production, as well as its transitions in neoliberalism. The region lies below mean sea level, is hugely impacted by floods and by salinity, and thereby not the best natural setting for agriculture. The midlands of Kerala, lying between the marine coasts on its west, and the Sahyadris, on its east, are the traditional lands of paddy cultivation. Kuttanad, in the midlands, was developed in the 2nd half of the 19th century through land reclamation from Vembanad Lake. Social structures of caste-class and patriarchy were fine-tuned to meet the production processes.

In the 19th century Travancore was linked to the world market through plantations of tea, coffee, spices and rubber set up by the Europeans in the Western Ghats. Food grains deficit was addressed through import of rice from other Asian colonial regions. Kuttanad's story of paddy production began with the state encouraging land reclamation from Vembanad Lake. The state's land reforms of 1865, and the policy of land ownership to the land reclaimers, gave birth to entrepreneurship in paddy production.

From the initial decades of the 20th century, Kuttanad saw its supressed castes, and toiling labourers attempt to alter the socio-economic situations. Social reform movements and Communist movements asserted for social dignity, economic share of profits, and unexploitative working conditions. The 1940s were vibrant in people's push to change the power structures of Kuttanad. Whereas the state's initiatives for economic production in the 2nd half of the 19th century becomes the first layering of Kuttanad's region formation, the organised efforts of people to reclaim their spaces became a second layering.

People's organised efforts, and the emergence of the Communist government in 1957 impacted the nature of the state in Kerala. This laid the foundations for a pro-people experience in Kerala as compared to most parts of independent India. In the 1960s and the 1970s Kuttanad, as many parts of the country, saw the spread of green revolution in food production. This changed the landscape and ecology through technological, chemical and biotechnological interventions. It increased production and made paddy cultivation a lucrative business. Land reforms by the Kerala state in the 1970s, and a vibrant trade unionism restructuring the socio-economics of Kuttanad.
By the end of the 1980s the logic of commercialisation made farmers withdraw from farming in many parts of Kuttanad. The economic production and the welfare measures of the state, it was articulated, could not match each other. The CPI(M) in the 1980s reformulated its stands, and it became pro-production and less labour assertive. From the 1990s, neoliberalism accelerated the thrust on cash crop cultivation in the third world. Even as Kuttanad attempted that, it could not go ahead mainly due to ecological constraints as well as the pressures asserted by trade unions and civil society.

From early 2000s, a neoliberal spatial layering developed in Kuttanad that saw capital investments in paddy production and in tourism. Paddy cultivation operates on large scale through mechanisation. Backwater tourism operates through the establishment of resorts on water fronts, and house-boats plying the Vembanad Lake. Environmental discourses rationalise the tourism industry. But in the people's story of the environment, tourism threatens their day-to-day lives. Fishers and mussel gatherers are threatened by the adverse impacts of technological and chemical interventions on the lake, and by pollutions by houseboats. Whereas paddy cultivation has eliminated labour, tourism provides very little employment to local people. In both cases, women and dalit labourers are not employed.

Even as the economy plays a prominent role in region formation, it sets off a complex set of relations with the environment and with social formations. The thesis tries to analyse region formation as the story of how landscapes are changed, and socio-economic powers are built. This time-space examination reveals Kuttanad not as a stable spatial entity, but a socio-cultural, spatio-economic process, that is under constant change.

The thesis attempts to (1) trace the process of region formation of Kuttanad from the 2nd half of the 19th century onwards (2) examine the changing relationship between nature, capital and labour in contemporary Kuttanad (3) analyse the role of environmental discourse in the restructuring of Kuttanad through tourism (4) analyse the realignments of social spaces. The methodology used is qualitative. Data sources are (1) Interviews and discussions (2) Studies, reports, statistics, documentary films (4) Reports and recommendations of the government and NGOs.

The thesis introduces Kuttanad from the popular imaginations of place as 'scene', and moves 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.

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 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 focussed 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 interlinkages 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 interlinkages 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', the main theoretical perceptions utilised deal with the interconnections between the ecological and the social, the ways in which capital produces space in society, and the importance of labour, in shaping landscape and spaces. These theorisations have been immensely useful in deciphering the complex nature of production of space in Kuttanad.

The relationships between different branches of production in the region, the scale of production, and the relationships between the 'spatial' and the 'social' develops a dynamics in each geographic and social division of labour. These have their own trajectories, but evolve through deep interconnections. Neoliberalism, as a process of accelerated mobility of capital, and of changed relations between the state, capital and labour, brings distinct regional implications in Kuttanad. 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. Women's spatio-economic transitions can be analysed in the intersections of
caste and patriarchy. Their spaces shrink in those social strata where socio-economic upward mobility limits women's activities to the families.

Mechanised agriculture in Kuttanad has drastically displaced labour, and there are no trade union assertions. Tourism's efforts to enclave spaces are being resisted by Left-political and environmental organisations. These efforts would benefit through larger scales of resistance, and through solidarities across dalit and women organisations.