Chapter 1

IMAGINING KUTTANAD

Kuttanad is imagined differently by distant-viewers and by people living their everyday lives in the region. Whereas the former is a ‘scene’ changing with time, the latter reveals the socio-economic and political processes through which the region is continuously created. Moreover, whereas the former is more or less homogeneous, the latter holds multiple imaginations, signifying tensions and contradictions. The chapter examines these imaginations, as well as the imaginations and perspectives through which scholarships on Kuttanad have evolved. These two knowledge areas help to take stock of contemporary socio-spatial issues emerging in the region and the gaps in scholarships vis-a-vis those issues. The overall changes happening in Kuttanad in neoliberalism has not been studied, and most notably a framework on region formation and its dynamics are very much lacking.

Introduction

Kuttanad is a region in South Central Kerala and captures the popular imagination as a ‘rice bowl’, with extensive paddy lands fringed with coconut palms and water bodies. It is also a land of boat races accompanied by songs, that gives a local seasoning to the several aspects of Kerala's most prominent festival, Onam. Imagining Kuttanad brings along its specific cuisines made from the locally available meat of duck, mussels, and fresh-water prawns and fish, as well as the locally produced coconut toddy. Kuttanad is a land of innumerable small and big bridges and the State Water Transport Corporation's boats take people to schools, colleges, churches and temples along the waterways and to the markets of Alleppey (Alapuzha) town. The imagination also holds large numbers of women and men working the fields, and they are part of a communist trade union, whose presence is vibrant in the region. In the last one decade, the imagination has strongly been captured by radical changes in the agricultural practices of the region, and the accelerated expansion of tourism. Today innumerable houseboats ply the Vembanad Lake and tourist resorts dot the water fronts.
Fig 1.1 Paddy fields of Kuttanad

Fig 1.2 Water bodies in Kuttanad

Fig 1.3: Backwater tourism creates a new ‘scene’ of commodified nature
The popular imaginations of the distant viewer evolves from the ecological uniqueness of the water rich region, and the ways of life, cuisines, festivals, socio-cultural aspects, and from tourist advertisements. They most often reflect a cohesiveness of the region through conceiving 'place as an inert experienced scene' (Pred 1985: 337). This cohesiveness evolves out of the fact that they are held by viewers whose everyday lives are not evolving in the region.

In contradistinction to the place as 'scene', the people of Kuttanad bring forth a dynamism through multiple imaginations, as a continuous process of reproduction of socio-economic and cultural practices/forms. These heterogeneous experiences act upon the historic and contemporary socio-spatial fault lines emerging in the processes of the region. The chapter examines the imaginations of Kuttanad as held by the people living in the region and as represented by scholarships on the region. It also maps the region, and gives a brief introduction to the region of Kuttanad.

**Mapping the region**

Kuttanad is mostly confined to the present-day Alleppey district, and also includes some portions of Kottayam and Pathanamthitta districts. Several rivers flowing down from the Western Ghats, meet the Vembanad Lake in the region before joining the Arabian Sea. Most parts of Kuttanad is located at elevations below mean sea level. Kuttanad is delta land of about 900 sq.km.

Prior to the monsoons, saline intrusions enter Kuttanad through the connections of the Lake with the Sea. During monsoons, the region is heavily prone to flooding. Cultivation is done at average elevations of 1.2 to 3 metres below mean sea level. Kuttanad, which was part of the erstwhile Travancore princely state, saw a process of land reclamation from the Lake, that was started at least by 1834. Paddy cultivation was the main purpose behind land reclamations, as the state was grappling with food grain deficit. FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN) had in 2013, declared Kuttanad as 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems'.

Vembanad Lake is one of the Ramsar sites of Kerala. It is one of the largest lakes on the western coast. It is also home to large varieties of fish, prawns, mussels and birds. Several fish species travel from the Sea to the Lake and vice-versa during the breeding season. The Salt

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1. M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation, 2011
2. Ramsar sites are selected for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. The Ramsar Convention, also known as the Convention on Wetlands, is named after Ramsar city in Iran, where the Convention was signed in 1971.
Water Barrier at Thanneermukkom (TSWB) was constructed on one of the narrowest sections of the Lake and became operative in the 1970s. When its shutters are closed, it prevents the salt water from the Sea entering in to the Lake, and thereby impacting the cultivations of the region. It was constructed to enable double cropping of paddy in Kuttanad.

Within Kuttanad, spatial demarcations are done on the basis of the implications of the human-nature relationships, in which TSWB plays an important role:

(1) 'North Kuttanad' (represented by yellow colour in the map) is relatively more impacted by saline intrusions from the Lake as compared to the South. It consists of parts of Vaikom taluk, and western parts of Changanacherry and Kottayam taluks.
(2) 'Lower Kuttanad' (represented by green colour in the map) is located just south of Vembanad Lake. It consists of Ambalapuzha and Kuttanad taluks of Alapuzha district.

(3) 'Upper Kuttanad' (represented by red colour in the map) is further south and towards the east, occupying relatively higher land elevations than Lower Kuttanad. It consists of Karthikapally taluk, parts of Kuttanad taluk (both in Alapuzha district), and and western part of Tiruvalla taluk of Pathanamthitta district.

Lower Kuttanad is the location of most of the land reclamations, and the location where most of the characteristic features of Kuttanad can be traced, from the cultivations at elevations below sea level, to the production impacts through TSWB (the kayal areas are shown in blue dots).

Notes on the map

1. The Vembanad Lake has a spread of over 205 sq.km. Salt water enters it through the Kochi harbour entrance.

2. Out of the total land available in Kuttanad 49.4% are wetlands. Wetlands lie between 0.5 to 2 metres below sea level which are protected by ring bunds and were reclaimed from the waters of the Lake. They remain waterlogged.

3. The remaining area is either garden lands known commonly as Purampokku. These are strips of land above mean sea level by 1 to 2 metres, where houses are built; coconut palms and homestead crops are grown on such land. Purampokku are dry lands like sandy tracts that are common lands/government lands.

4. Spatial layout of technology and infrastructure- Thanner Mukkom salt water barrier, Thottappally spillway, and A-C (Alapuzha- Changanacherry) Road and canal are the main features of the Kuttanad development programme.

5. Sabarimala, a prominent Hindu pilgrimage centre is located on the banks of the upper reaches of River Pamba.


7. Alapuzha in the map implies Alleppey, both the names are used. The former is the original Malayalam version.
Multiple Imaginations from Kuttanad

The narrations of people such as fishers, small and large farmers, women labourers, mussel gatherers, toddy tappers, civil society activists, workers in tourist houseboats and so on, reflect historic and contemporary socio-spatial processes, structures and changes in Kuttanad.

Agricultural Labourers

Kamala is a 74-year old erstwhile agricultural labourer of the Ezhava caste (OBC) from Kainakary village. She narrates Kuttanad's story of transition from dire poverty and hardship to labourers' struggles through trade unions and to contemporary times of relative prosperity:

“We had no noon—there was no lunch! Several days we have survived just on water. And today our children are so choosy— not this breakfast, not this rice and curry and so on...When there is an invitation for a wedding feast, they first find out what food would be served. If it is biryani, then they go, otherwise they do not! When we tell them of our past experiences, they ask us why you did so much work? Why you did not refuse? Why you accepted such low wages? Why you did not assert that wages were not sufficient? They cannot imagine the situations of those times” (referring to the 1950s and the 1960s)

“We are not educated, but today there is hardly anyone who is not. Today we get rice, sugar and kerosene from the ration shop every month. Labourers go to work wearing a watch, so that they can keep track of working time.”

Thankamma is a 68-year old woman from Nedumudy village, who belongs to the Pulaya caste (dalit), and has been an agricultural labourer since the age of 18. She narrates her experiences of Kuttanad as one of increasing contradictions. She is always looking out for work, but is drastically underemployed as machines have replaced human labour in the farms. Being employed only for 20 days on an average in a year, she recalls how they used to protest the arrival of the harvesters in Kuttanad. But the question also arose that if they stop the entry of harvesters, who would harvest? The younger generation is not available to do the job. She identifies the crux of the situation as being based on the increased wages that they were able to procure through workers' struggles: “Because of the higher wages, they do not want us to labour in their farms. That is the real issue”.

She expresses anger and a sense of injustice as farmers in several parts of Kuttanad leave lands fallow, ironically those that were obtained through land reforms. Today, she says, that the landowners are playing with the lives of the labourers: “If anyone leaves land fallow in our area, we would sow and reap. If men do not come forward, never mind, the women would do it.”
Thankamma and Kamala are contemporaries, who have gone through similar lives as agricultural labourers in an oppressive socio-economic system. But after the land reforms of the 1970s and the socio-economic changes that happened in the lives of the marginalised people, the OBCs like Ezhava were able to procure better economic and educational growth. Hence the hardships for Kamala are experiences of the past, but for Thankamma there is a strong sense of continuity as she brings out the contradictions of high wages and no work, and of the erstwhile landless, who opt to not cultivate today on their own lands. In the context of struggles in contemporary times, she placed less hopes on men than on women, the reason being that the former easily complied and negotiated, say through liquor and other vulnerabilities. But Kamala's language is different today because her life experiences have changed. She is no longer a labourer, and the socio-economic prosperity of her caste group has changed for the better.

With the harvesters and other capital intensive farm operations, there is no labour being absorbed in the farms. The younger generation of labourers have no experience of farm labour, and the women are intermittently employed through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) doing odd jobs like village road construction. They are mostly OBCs and not dalits; their socio-economic positioning in the lower middle class have shifted their concerns and preoccupation towards domestic duties and responsibilities:

Sheeja is a 32-year old labourer and belongs to the Muslim community. She expressed Kuttanad as a nostalgia for the bygone times that was rich in paddy fields, and when diseases like cancer were not rampant. Women of her generation do not have the expertise of farm jobs like weeding, transplanting, harvesting and dehusking. Being educated up to pre-degree, she takes on the responsibilities of teaching her children or taking them for tuitions, with the hope that they would become educated-employed and not become labourers. Sheeja's nostalgia for the past is comparable to the 'scene' described by Pred (1985), in which she has not laboured, a nostalgia not shared by Thankamma and Kamala.

**Farmers (Landowners/Tenants)**

The changing socio-economics of different social groups and the near-elimination of labour from farm operations have brought in a situation where only a trickle of the labour force represents the continuity of agricultural labourers in Kuttanad. Between this trickle as represented by Thankamma on one hand and the large-scale farmers on the other, there is a continuing tussle of power relationship. Thankamma and Kamala hold no nostalgia for the past, which was for them a time-space experience of agony, hunger and suppression.
Small farmers like Biju also remark that their lives have economically changed for the better, as compared to the past. But erstwhile large landowners reveal nostalgia for the past, when their control over the labourers was much more powerful. Josichen, a 48-year-old large farmer, narrated that the relationship between the farmer and the labourer “...were like two sides of the same coin. Today they (the labourers) have no humility. There is only a relationship based on the amount of money that you can pay.”

At the same time, his imagination of Kuttanad also represents a spatial tension between farming and the emergent tourism. He points out that the new concept of agro-tourism conceives agriculture as a way to encourage tourism in the region: “I am not of the opinion that tourists should not come, but tourism should not develop by destructing already existing things here.”

**Worker in Tourist Houseboat**

Aji is a 34-year-old driver of a tourist houseboat, and belongs to the Ezhava community. He studied up to pre-degree and sees Kuttanad as a region transiting from paddy cultivation to tourism: “In the farms, there is no work for the labourers and the younger generation does not want to be farm-workers. But tourism industry would be detrimentally impacted with decline in paddy cultivation. What the tourists like best about Kuttanad is its greenery.” Thus Aji brings forth the relationship between farming and tourism, within a perspective of complementarity.

**Fishers and Mussel-Gatherers**

Rajiv is a 55-year-old employee of the lime shell or white mussel co-operative society in Kainakary village. For him the contemporary imagination of Kuttanad is one in which pollution looms as a large problem: “The tourist boats dump latrine wastes in to the Lake. A houseboat terminal is planned to be built at Vattakayal. If that happens, collecting white mussels would be difficult.”

“The Lake is also polluted by the chemicals flowing down from the fields. Even as we no longer drink the water of the Lake, day-to-day requirements like washing of clothes and vessels are being done. Dysentry is widespread”

Sateesh is a 54-year-old traditional inland fisherman, belonging to the Dheevara community. His imagination of Kuttanad is predominated by the balances required to be maintained between agriculture and fishing: “The natural infiltration of saline water in to the Lake during pre-monsoons is beneficial for the reproduction of fish and mussels, but it is detrimental for
growing a second annual crop of paddy. So when one activity benefits, the other suffers. It seems difficult for both to prosper”

**Toddy Tappers**

Vasudevan is a 55-year old toddy tapper (toddy tappers exclusively belong to the *Ezhava* community) whose imagination of Kuttanad is described by the sharply declining coconut cultivation and toddy tapping. The traditional toddy tapper is trapped in the occupation as the land owners neglect the coconut palms and the tappers are not able to procure sufficient amounts of toddy, clearly indicating an end of this occupation in Kuttanad: “Our generation perhaps represents the last of the toddy tappers of Kuttanad. None of us encourage our children to enter the occupation, but instead try to educate them and take them out of this declining sector.”

**Civil Society Activist**

Jayan is a trained accountant belonging to the Nair community. He lives in Champakulam and is an active member of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). His imagination of Kuttanad is one of large-scale leasing in of land by wealthy persons, the detrimental impacts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on the Lake, and the pollutions by houseboats. He sees both farming and tourism as marginalising the livelihoods of the traditional fishers of the Vembanad Lake: “The farmers form a majority of the population here and the people stand for them. The opening and closing of the shutters of the salt water barrier at Thanneermukkom is dominantly done in favour of farming, placing the fisher folk at disadvantage. The tourist activity on the Lake also detrimentally impacts the fisher folk. My political stand is in the interest of the ordinary people.”

**Socio-Spatial Processes in the Creation of the Region**

Scholars have in contemporary times voiced the importance of the spatial processes as being significant in the understanding of various symbols and imageries, which at the same time evolve geographical alienations:

... each imagery, even as it is only the outward appearance of modern development, escalates people’s hopes. Thus, imageries that act as symbols, mislead people; and the truth does not reveal. Any market-oriented institution becomes a symbol of development. In these circumstances, the creation of a geographical alienation goes unnoticed. New infrastructure and institutions create new spaces, and encroach upon already existing spaces, evolving a process of spaces encroaching upon spaces...

(Gurukkal, 2013; 145)³

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³ Only the jist of the passage is translated by me from Malayalam
The reflections and experiences of the people are as formulated by Pred (1985: 338), 'integrated human beings who are at once objects and subjects and whose thoughts, actions, experiences and ascriptions of meaning are constantly becoming, through their involvement in the workings of society and its structural components as they express themselves in the becoming of places.'

The multiple voices of people emerge from a time-space process of human-nature interactions and we can see that paddy farming as a major relation of production in the water-abundant Kuttanad, was intensified through major projects that involved large capital and which restructured the ecology. TSWB and modern cultivation methods are prominent interventions that by regulating the natural water flows and the soil nutrients, set in a changed ecology that impacted the water-system of the entire region and the various non-farm livelihoods. Thus a dialectics of space emerges, which by curtailing the livelihoods of several communities, shrink the prospects of prosperity that they had made through specific relations with nature. The farm projects deteriorated the abundant aquatic life of the Vembanad Lake and paved way for social and spatial shrinkage of communities dependent on it. The project of tourism in the region, whose pollutions as well as the physical-spatial presence add a new layering of spatiality, further threatens these communities.

Even as the above-mentioned ecological and socio-spatial changes are impacting the non-farm sections of people, there is another set of spatial dynamics happening within the farm sector. The accelerated capital-intensive farming methods have displaced the labourers, as land owners and tenants utilise machines and keep out human hands. For the landless labourers, it is a lost space, one in which they had in the near past struggled for higher wages and decent working conditions. The land reforms had helped to expand the middle class and generally take the OBC section towards improved socio-economic situations. The women labourers, through decline of stark poverty, acquisition of education, lack of farm employment and the entry in to the lower middle class, have moved in to a space of domestic preoccupation. But the dalits who did not procure land as the OBCs (former tenants) seek non-agricultural employment. So there are a number of connections being played out between human-nature relationships and the social structures/practices as described by caste-class and patriarchy.

Harvey (1984: 2) writes on the working knowledge of territories that is possessed by all societies, classes and social groups. This knowledge which he calls “geographical lore”, is acquired through experience and may take the form of a loosely-defined spatial and environmental imagery or of a formal body of knowledge. This, he says, might be used to dominate nature and other peoples and to construct an alternative geography of social life. But
from the imaginations of Kuttanad articulated by people of different classes, social groups, men and women, the knowledge of several sections of people become defunct as their social spaces are eroded through dominant and powerful spatial processes. Hence the “geographical lore” is continuously pulled in opposite directions. It is this dialectics that create and restructure a region, as Fagan (1995 from Howitt 2000: 4) articulates, region becomes a political discourse.

**Literature on Kuttanad**

From the late 1990s, Kamalasanan (who is 78 years old today) wrote a number of books on Kuttanad. These are not literary works like that of Thakazhi Shivashananakara Pillai, who captured the social nuances of the region through fiction and was conferred the Kendra Sahitya Academy Award in 1958 and the Jnanpith in 1984. Kamalasanan's writings are biographical, based on his lived experiences in the region. In discussing literature on Kuttanad, it is not feasible to start anywhere else other than from Kamalasanan. All major academic studies of post-2000 have utilised his writings as an important source for understanding Kuttanad.

Kamalasanan's most notable book, *Kuttanaadum karshaka tozhilali prasthanavum* (1999) narrates the historical creation of Kuttanad through land reclamation (from Vembanad Lake) for paddy cultivation in the second half of the 19th century up to the 1940s. It tells us of the transitions from the feudal mode of production. The book narrates the emergence of the communist movement in Kuttanad in the 1940s and the political happenings up to 1964, when the communist party split. As different and distinct from other literature, his writings deeply portray the concreteness of Kuttanad. He is a communist party activist since 1950s. Kamalasanan's writings are not academic, they are rich and earnest narrations of the people of the region, whose labour created the paddy fields, and who sowed and reaped within a hierarchically organised social system, and who organised to resist the socio-economic suppressions of caste and class.

His autobiography, *Oru Kuttanadan Ormakoyittu*, (2005) that translates as 'A harvest of memories of Kuttanad', reads like the biography of Kuttanad and the narratives speak from the vantage of the ordinary people. They bring to mind the significance of writings based on nuanced everyday experiences as pointed out by Pandian (2008), who had critiqued the dominance of non-affected articulations of caste in social science. Pandian used Tamil literature of Bama and Gunashekharan to illustrate how the day-to-day narrations of ordinary lives have the potential to reveal the lived experiences of caste. He points out how such literature concretely demonstrates what caste means for the people at the receiving end of the
caste system. Kamalasanan's writings also have such a quality, even as it differs from the
literature of Bama and Gunashekharan, in that it reveals the actual names of people, places
and historical incidents. His writings contribute through an important role- that concretely tell
us of the socio-economic relations in times gone by and of challenges in them brought forth
through organised resistance of people.

His imagination of Kuttanad, even as is rich in concrete happenings of the region, reveals
their significant relationships with the happenings of the world. For instance, the ideological
impacts of Marxism, the role of the educated youth in bringing these thoughts to the region,
and the role of the industrial trade unions of nearby town of Alleppey, in shaping the
agricultural labourers' union in rural Kuttanad; and the linkages with the resistance to caste in
Travancore, like the efforts of Dr. Palpu, who called attention to the importance of education
in challenging the lives of the 'lower' castes.

**Academic Studies through Different Disciplinary Foci**

In the past fifty years or so, Kuttanad has captured the attention of academicians due to
several reasons. Every decade from the 1970s has produced fascinating studies and these
collectively become a rich source for examining Kuttanad as a region of continuity and
change. The issues studied by scholars and the frameworks utilised for analysis fall within a
wide range of disciplinary focus. The sort of imaginations that have been pursued and
explored by the studies is examined to lay out the paths of research already available.

From the 1970s, every decade has brought forth some prominent changes in the socio-
economic and spatial relationships in the region. Research has usually focused on such new
developments and their social, economic and political implications. The two major processes
of change initiated in the 1970s were the operation of the Thanneermukkom salt water barrier
(TSWB) that regulated the natural annual inflow of salinity in to Kuttanad from the sea
through the Vembanad Lake; and the materialisation of land reforms. Whereas the former is a
 technological intervention made to enhance annual double cropping of paddy in Kuttanad, the
latter was the outcome of efforts to moderate the skewed land ownership and which became
actualised at the ground level through exceptionally notable assertions by trade unions.
Scholars who studied Kuttanad in the decade examined the socio-economic contexts of the
widespread organisation of landless labourers (Jose 1976; Tharamangalam 1981) and the
impacts of TSWB on fisher folk and mussel collectors (Kannan 1979). Jose and Kannan
studied from the framework of Economics and Tharamangalam from Sociology.

The 1940s had marked the evolving of a dynamic process of trade unionism among
agricultural labourers in Kuttanad. Jose (1976) examined the conditions that led to the
organisation of landless labourers during the period. It is true that changes in traditional agriculture had brought in several institutional and technological changes, but he notes that such objective conditions are not sufficient by themselves to evolve trade unionism. He associates the situation with tenancy reforms of Travancore state and the contexts of well-organised industrial trade union in the town of Alleppey. The increasing capital-intensive methods in farming had made unemployment and underemployment of labourers rampant, leading to their polarisation.

Tharamangalam (1981), points out high population density, capitalist farming, sharply polarised agricultural population, high proportion of landless labourers and a relatively literate and awakened population as having created the social contexts for the political mobilisation of agricultural labourers in Kuttanad.

Kannan (1979) studied the ecological and the socio-economic consequences of the water control projects such as the TSWB. Kannan is critical of these projects on the grounds that they did not actually bring about the intended impacts, and at the same time, they detrimentally impacted the lives of ordinary people. The spillway built at Thottappally succeeded in diverting only about one-third of the designed water flow. TSWB marginalised the livelihoods of the fisher folk and mussel gatherers. He points out that such projects are centered on economics and engineering, and are therefore unable to maintain a proper perspective of development in which the broader economic, social and environmental features are taken in to consideration.

From the 1970s up to the end of 1980s, Kuttanad very prominently became a 'rice bowl' of Kerala, when rice cultivation in Kuttanad 'became a lucrative business' (Tharamangalam 1981). But by the time Eswaran (1990) conducted his field study in late 1980s, the situations were changing because many farmers were withdrawing from cultivation and leaving land fallow. The land reforms of 1970s had procured ownership rights to the tenants and had legislated a land ceiling of 15 acres on an individual. This was also a move to abolish tenancy. But Eswaran brings to light a reinstatement of tenancy in Kuttanad, with a change in the social profile of tenants, as compared to the pre-reform days. The upper- and middle-caste owners of land were leasing out to the 'lower' castes. The land owners were withdrawing from cultivation on grounds of decreased profits. As this move increased the unemployment of labourers, they leased in small patches of land for subsistence.

Even as these are extremely useful studies on Kuttanad, frameworks of interconnections between the social and the spatial, are not available. The issue of spatiality was only beginning to emerge in social science in the 1970s.
Contemporary Interdisciplinary Approaches

From the 2000 onwards scholars have been engaging with Kuttanad through a diversity of issues and approaches. The reasons could be that on one hand, rapid changes were happening on social, economic and cultural fronts in Kuttanad, and on the other the approaches of social science were often being critiqued and reconstructed. The importance of the 'spatial' in analysing society was also gaining grounds.

Rammohan (2006) critiqued the conventions followed in writing economic history, the conventions as engaging either at the macro level or at the micro level only. The importance of examining their interconnections was often neglected. He therefore attempted to write the economic history of Kuttanad within a new framework of analysis. He examined the region within a period spanning from the mid 19th century (when land reclamation began) to the time of the 2nd World War. He traces the world economic system of mid-19th century as enabling the development of Kuttanad as a rice-producing region of Travancore state. He also examines the caste-based dynamics with regard to land ownership. The pioneering attempts of land reclamation by dalits created a possibility and knowledge base, that was utilised later on large scale, through capital investments and slave-like labour deployed by the upper castes, to create more land for cultivation. Thus the internal dynamics of labour and capital created the concrete details, born through the impacts of macro economic processes of European capitalism on the princely state of Travancore. The methodology and analytical frame for the 'micro' follows an interdisciplinary approach of drawing from ethnography, ecology and cultural geography. He makes a conscious effort to examine the locally specific elements that influenced the creation of the Kuttanad rice bowl. Unlike the conventions of Economics and most of Social Science, he draws connections between the ecological specificities of Kuttanad and the historic development of usury. He notes that in the fragile ecosystem, the incidence of crop failure was high and therefore the need for credit was intense (2006: 58).

Varghese (2002) studied Kuttanad of the late 1990s. His disciplinary base is Economics and he attempted an interdisciplinary approach, with Ecology. The ecological specificity of Kuttanad is identified through its elevation below sea level, high propensity to floods, annual inflow of salinity from the sea through the Lake, high acidity levels of the soil and an abundance of pests. Ecological characteristics are selected on the basis of their usefulness for paddy cultivation. Varghese uses the term 'ecological landscape', implying a planned development of the region that worked around the ecological specificities. The planned intervention of the state, known as the Kuttanad development project sought to intensify paddy production, to address the freaks of nature and to make way for a second annual crop.
of paddy. The project materialised through the technological interventions of TSWB, a spillway and a road made between the towns of Alleppey and Changanacherry. Varghese's analytical frame is enriched by the fact that by linking the economy with ecology and thereby articulating the economic landscape, he is able to critically examine the Kuttanad development project, through a cognizance of ecology. He points to major mismatches between the ecological peculiarities of the region and the features of the project. Precisely because of this reason, he qualifies the project as amateur, that did not have a good grab upon the real problems and factors that wreak wreckage in the economic landscape of Kuttanad. By the end of 1990s, when he conducted field work, a marked decline of paddy cultivation had set in, which he notes, has seriously damaged people's confidence. He suggests that the economic development of Kuttanad can be enhanced only by embracing the specificity of its ecology, for which the people need to be trained, '...to churn out prospects and fortunes by keeping intact the peculiarity of the region' (2002: 68).

Another interdisciplinary study that also focused on the Kuttanad of late 1990s is that of Narayan (2003). Whereas Varghese demonstrated the lack of ecological sensibility in economic development, for Narayan the frame of interdisciplinarity sought to examine the socio-political, which he describes as 'the comprehension of the ecological, economic, social and political issues through a single prism'. The issue that inspired Narayan is the political tussle in Kerala in general, and in Kuttanad in particular, over shifts in land use of paddy lands. Land owners sought to shift from paddy to cash crops or to non-agricultural use, for increased profits. In either case, the agricultural labourers were bound to be displaced and unemployed. The resistance to land use shifts by the labourers' union of CPI(M) became very vibrant in Kuttanad in 1997. It assumed the label of 'Save rice field agitation' and obtained support from Civil society groups like Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). It saw a political polarisation between CPI(M) and Kerala Congress (Mani). For Narayan, politics becomes the interaction of actors over resources where even the weak actors possess some power to act. Hence politics becomes central to political ecology. When changes in ecology are brought forth, say through land use shift, the costs and benefits associated with it are distributed unequally among actors. Therefore planned ecological/ environmental change is not an issue of technical management, but is political in character. It impacts existing socio-economic inequalities and political processes. For instance, land use shifts further marginalises the most vulnerable sections of society like dalit women. The dynamics can be understood only by taking in to consideration the social changes reflected in politics since the 1980s. The land reforms of the 1970s had lessened the stark socio-economic contradictions. At the same time he notes that the aging of the trade unions has lessened their vibrancy.
Some of the most recent studies on Kuttanad (of the contemporary decade) focus on resource conflicts and on ecology/environment, like the conflict of interest between farming and fishing, and between tourism and farming/fishing. Narayanan and Chorey (2012) studied three Indian wetlands in the context of environmental degradation threatening the livelihood system. One of the case studies by Dwivedi (2011) is on the Kuttanad-Vembanad wetland system. It focuses on TSWB as the object of conflict, between revenue administration on the two sides of the Lake and between the departments of agriculture and fisheries in the operations of the TSWB. Farmers hold more influence as compared to the fishing communities due to holdings of land resources by them.

The last decade marked an unprecedented growth of tourism in Kuttanad. This has brought forth yet another process of marginalisation of the fisher folk. Karlaganis and Narayanan (2014) studied the inter-linkages between investments in tourism and the impacts on environment. They point out that there has been a progressive capitalisation of the Vembanad Lake by tourism, which marks a transition from the earlier interventions that were rice-centric. The region today faces a dual process of environmental degradation and livelihood crisis. The authors point out a shift in attitude against traditional occupations like farming and against manual labour. This shift is also enhanced by the attraction of possible entrepreneurial opportunities in tourism. Environmental and livelihood impacts were also studied by Sebastian (2009), Safoorabebi and Devadas (2014), Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999).

The contemporary studies using interdisciplinary approaches have widened the scope of interpretation, mostly by utilising ecology as being instrumental in the development trajectory of the region, or as Varghese (2002) points out, the lack of sufficient attention to ecology causing failures in its economy.

The studies on Kuttanad in the past 50 years have focused on the following issues:

1. land and labour relations in paddy cultivation
2. ecological conflicts on TSWB
3. spatial conflicts of tourism with other sectors of production

From the narrations of the people, it is evident that Kuttanad is going through a new phase of capital-intensive paddy cultivation, expanded tourism activities on the Vembanad Lake, and toddy tapping seeing no scope of regional survival. These contemporary trends of the region have not been studied. Moreover, the survey of literature points out that a framework of analysis capturing the interconnections of the spatial and the socio-economic processes, and as being the cornerstone of the dynamics of the region, is not available.
Emerging Questions

The imaginations of Kuttanad by people reveal a number of spatial contestations and tensions. These mark the distinctions emerging from lived experiences, in contradistinction from places as 'scene' that does not evolve the internal dynamics. Across time, different layerings of spatiality have enhanced or marginalised some activities and communities in the region. Literature shows an increased interest in spatial processes and inter-disciplinary approaches in contemporary times. This has notably brought in the examination of ecology in social science, and this merits significance for Kuttanad that is ecologically unique.

Contemporary changes in the region, discussed by people, appear to be quite swift, and we do not have sufficient scholarships that have looked in to these aspects and their interlinkages. This is exceptionally an important point to note, as the changes imply those that are happening in the phase of neoliberalism. The increase in capital-intensity in farming and the increase in tourism seem to be the most conspicuous aspects of change in Kuttanad in neoliberalism. These are creating changes in the lives of people, acting differently on the basis of caste-class and gender. Their implications, patterns and resistance need to be examined to unveil the regional processes in contemporary Kuttanad.

There are many excellent studies on Kuttanad, and contemporary studies are enriched through inter-disciplinary approaches. The latter often touch upon Kuttanad as a regional entity, but none of them examine the process of region formation. This becomes historically important to understand, as well as important to examine in what ways the contemporary regional processes are impacted by neoliberalism.

Taking into count the narrations of people of Kuttanad, and the available scholarships on the region, the thesis attempts to study the region formation of Kuttanad by tracing the past processes, and its continuity and change leading to the contemporary developments. Jose (1976) and others have called attention to the important changes that happened in the region in the 2nd half of the 19th century that sets in a commercial relationship of production. This phase emerges as an important beginning of region formation of Kuttanad. Hence this is identified as the starting point of Kuttanad's region formation. The thesis aims to examine the historical geography of the region by examining the relationships between nature, capital and labour. How do these aspects change in contemporary Kuttanad? What is the role of the state and of the people? What is the significance and implications of environmental discourses in neoliberalism, that seem to be articulated through the tourism sector? How do all these and other aligned aspects change the social spaces in Kuttanad?
Some of the emerging questions can be identified as follows: How did the major historical transitions like land reclamation, land reforms, TSWB and the entry of harvesters, change the spatial structure of Kuttanad? How did the social reform and trade union movements change the social relationships in Kuttanad? What are the implications of neoliberalism on the region formation of Kuttanad? What are the spatial restructuring evolving through tourism and what is the nature of ecological conflicts in people's day-to-day life emerging from it? How and when do the spatial structures become social structures and vice-versa? How and in what ways have these changes been impacting the social divisions of labour, women and dalits? What are the theoretical grounds that can suitably inform the directions of inquiry mentioned above? The proceeding chapter examines theories on region formation, and makes a selection of compatibility with the emerging questions.