Chapter 1

Introduction

As early historic economies got drafted into a path of capitalist development, there occurred a diminution of the space of general economy and the ‘wild exuberance’ that marked it. The restrictive economy with *Homo Economicus* as the central figure began to overwhelm sociality. Gradually the collective consumer was replaced by the individualised consuming subject, maximisation of economic surplus and utility emerged as driving principles. This is concomitant with the rise of capitalist labour market and ‘loss of intimacy’ with the economic activities.

Georges Bataille’s distinction between ‘general economy’ and ‘restrictive economy’ is a turning point in the anthropological approaches to economic processes. He re-conceptualised ritual and religious sacrifice, feast, gift, and festival that involve social consumption within the general economy. Acts of general economy are taken to be indicative of ‘surrender of commodities without return’, ‘non-productive destruction’, and ‘luxurious squandering of energy’ rather than growth. Restrictive economy, on the other hand, comprises activities of production and consumption to fulfil individual necessities and demands. These activities are coded by a different set of laws framed in the utilitarian calculus.

This study examines, inspired by the conceptual schemes put forth by Bataille, the economies of two tribal communities-Mannans and Paliyans-residing at the Kerala side of the Western Ghats in Southern Peninsular India. The abstraction of general and restrictive economy that Bataille advances however necessarily undergoes amends, qualifications and
modifications in relation to specific field of enquiry. This is mainly because in his conceptual scheme state does not figure much. While Bataille discusses the agency of the state, it appears to be more at a descriptive level rather than conceptual-analytic. Among the Western Ghats communities, restrictive economic practices avalanched onto the prevailed general economic practices with the lead role of the state. From the ancient days of long-distance trade with Rome through the middle centuries of Arab trade and much more intensely as also extensively from the period of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British colonial trade, Southwest India has been world’s spice garden. The local Kings of Travancore and Cochin had to impose state monopoly on maritime trade of spices since sixteenth century had close connectivity with the tribal communities as collectors of spices and other forest produces.

Tribal communities experienced drastic habitat changes when the dam (Mullaperiyar Dam) was built towards the end of the nineteenth century (1895), as vast area of forest and their lived place got submerged. To begin with, it damned¹ the rivers Periyar and Mulla to irrigate otherwise non-arable land. Later, it got the fame as a hydro-electric project. Further, the princely state recasted the forest as a game sanctuary in 1934 and privileged the elite interests over the local livelihood cultures. Consequently, the communities that we are studying were displaced from their habitat within the dense evergreen rain forests, to its fringe which has been at the margin of the market. They got ‘colonised’² there with the full initiative of the state. Subsequently, the post-colonial state redefined their physical habitat as a Protected Area—Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR). With this redefinition, the habitat began to be viewed as a space where human
presence ought to be minimised. This thesis probes the consequences of such a displacement and redefines it, so far as the two tribes focussed in it.

What is more, in the current times of Globalisation, the state is an overarching agency and not an unified agency as it was during princely or colonial governance. It is a nexus of local, provincial, regional, national, and global institutions. Different agencies—which include the tribal hamlet, the three-tier Panchayat, state, and national governments, international development agencies like World Bank-congregate and interact. Illustrative of this co-presence can be found in the Eco-Development Project of the World Bank-through Global Environmental Facility. Through this project, the tribal communities are increasingly being inducted into the scheme of market oriented development notion. By way of community participation in forest conservation, they are made the subjects or bearers of the developmental modernity.

1. **Anthropological studies of economies**

In this section a brief history of anthropological works on economic and material processes are explored. This is to situate the present study in the wider theoretical context. Malinowski’s work titled *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (2002), has been a major influence on the subfield of economic anthropology. He explored various spheres of exchange and the importance of ceremonial exchange of valuables called the kula.³ To him, the logic of ceremonial exchange is to give an item or a series of items explicitly designed to obligate the partner to make an appropriate return later. Another interpretation of exchange is from Marcel Mauss’s treatise on *The Gift* (1990). He also maintains that gift exchanges are characterised by the obligation of giving, receiving and returning. Chief among the three
Obligations is that of the returning. According to Mauss, the ‘spirit’ inherent in the gift giving forces the recipient to make a return, he calls this ‘the spirit of the gift’. As a result, one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence. To keep this thing is dangerous, not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it comes morally, physically and spiritually from a person. Further, in giving things, ‘a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself – himself and his possession – to others’ (Mauss, 1990).

Economic anthropology became an important sub-field in anthropology, after 1950’s, following the debate between substantivists and formalists. Karl polanyi’s works, especially The Great Transformation (1944) got strongly identified with the substantivist side of the strident and irresolvable formalist-substantivist debate. All economies, Polanyi argued, have mechanism of distribution, but only market (capitalist) economies are integrated (primarily) through ‘exchange’ on price-setting markets. ‘Reciprocity denotes movements between correlative points of symmetrical groupings; redistribution designates appropriational movement toward a center and out of it again; exchange refers here to vice-versa movements…. between “hands” under a market system.’ (Polanyi, 1957: 250)

Even if there are conceptual differences among Malinowski, Mauss and Polanyi their focus was similar - on the movements or circulation of things. Every human act anticipates reciprocity; this was an assumption common to them. All the three overlooked the anthropology of consumption.

Daniel Miller (1996) states that in the 1940’s and 1950’s anthropologists often ended their ethnographic works with a description on social change. Consumption
is treated as an arrival of western goods in a particular region, and the subsequent loss of local unadulterated culture. This linear historical description pervades the works of those economic anthropological studies influenced by substantivists. Miller further noted that after 1980’s, there is a growing interest among anthropologists on consumption, which constitute a “fundamental transformation” in the nature of discipline of anthropology as a whole.

One of the central concerns of Bataille’s project was to widen the frame of social enquiry to capture ways of devouring or consuming. His distancing of “general economy” from “restrictive economy” opens up new trajectories of enquiry about consumption, exchange and hybridity. This is the basis for employing the theoretical complex of Bataille. What it reveals to us is that there are possibilities to self reflexively re-view the complexities of “unproductive expenditure”.

2. Objectives

The central objective of the thesis is to decipher the heterogeneity of economies of the “tribal” communities when they get entangled in the contemporary market system. The main question addressed in this thesis is, how they got positioned in restrictive economy? This question enables another one, that is, what are the elements of general economy that are persistent? What is interesting regarding the economy of communities is the complexities of the coexistence of ritual consumption along with the individualistic consumption characteristic of modernity.

The major task of this study is to delineate and present the distinction of economies in their complex and multiple embeddings. Is the distinction of Bataille a black and white picture of contrasting economies? When we concentrate on the “wasteful expenditure” in general economy of the Western
Ghat’s communities, several questions emerge: is it not that these communities procured the required money for such expenditures, in the first instance, from the market? Are there economic practices and events that may not be classifiable as either the general or the restrictive economy? It also becomes important to explore the negotiation and transgression of “tribal” perception of *kadu* with the state’s perception of forest as a manageable space.

3. Techniques and Means of Information

The study relies on ethnographic and historical methods. Information on the past is generated from the State Administrative Reports, Forest Administrative Reports, Census Reports, Gazetteers, Ethnographic Reports and also from oral narratives. Field work techniques comprise observation, interview, open-ended questionnaire and conversations. The usual criticism against ethnography is that, it portrays native life without taking into account of larger system and history in their life world. This study however places the subjects under study, within the world economy and developmental modernity, and examines the structure of power that shape and constrains their livelihood activities. This is discussed and argued in the context of some of the recent ethnographies, which meshes anthropological and historical /political economy concerns. Anthropologists, thus oriented, began to argue that formation of communities was intimately connected with history of colonialism, empire building, international trade and state formation.

4. Organisation of the study

The thesis is divided into six chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 describes how tribal communities’ economic and community life were related to forest (*kadu*), in the early decades of 20th century; i.e. almost a century of British colonial rule of the society and environment.
Chapter 3 discusses the community’s perception of ‘place’ and state’s perception of ‘space’ contact and interact. Chapter 4 examines the ‘restrictive economy’ of communities, and shows how, production and consumption links to the market and “developmental” agencies, including the state. Chapter 5 focuses on the general economy of the communities, and their problematic relation with the market and state. Chapter 6 is the conclusion of the thesis.

1 Mackenzie (1963) describes the streams and other form of water flows that was affected by the creation the construction of mulla-periyar dam.

2 Morris (1982) explains the establishment of ‘Colonies’ for the tribes with an objective to settle them on land permanently.

3 Kula is a system of ceremonial exchange described by Malinowski (2002) for the Trobriand Island and other islands off the coast of New Guinea. The inhabitants of these islands, though diverse in their linguistic and cultural affiliations, share a common system of ceremonial exchange characterised by the circulation of two kinds of ceremonial objects: shell necklaces and shell armbands. Necklaces flow one way along the circuit of exchange partners, armbands the other way. It is accompanied by other kinds of exchange, and is important element in the negotiation and maintenance of prestige, status and rank.

4 Substantivists treated the economy in terms of institutional processes through which people maintained social relations and upheld group-specific cultural values. For them difference between economies are in kind. Therefore, comparative studies of economy are necessary.

5 Formalists argued that economic models developed by microeconomics could be universally applied. Maximum was a key concept for the formalists, as microeconomic models were intended to maximize, or atleast optimize, utility. They also believed that western-type market and primitive-substinance economies are different only in degree.

6 In recent years, in literature and culture studies, there has been much work done on cultural hybridity, such as Homi Babha (1994). Babha stresses how a colonial hybrid erases the seemingly natural division of cultures and the language of culture difference that were so useful for a colonial discourse in asserting its authority over native cultures. Unlike Babha, Yang’s (2000) notion of ‘economic hybridity’ focuses on both discourses and nondiscourses of the natives, who incorporate elements of western modernity and gained strength. When we use the word hybridity in this thesis the focus is the latter.

7 The methodological predicament of anthropologists that has been epistemologically known as ‘crisis of representation’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986&Marcus and Fisher 1986) is thus addressed in this thesis. This ethnography writing on the economy is reflexive by taking into account the cultural dimensions and also recognise local economy’s embedded ness in larger global system. The question of authenticity and authority of the researcher is not sustain in this ethnography.