

The Making and Unmaking of Kuttanad

Development and Transformations Below Sea Level

Thresy Vallikappen

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
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Abstract

The aim of my research is to explore the transformation of the physical and social landscapes in Kuttanad, which is closely related to the political and economic dynamisms in Keralam, India and the rest of the world. By social landscape, I mean, the social composition, stratifications, relations and the complexities connected with the society. The transformation of the physical and social landscapes in my study area is deeply connected to the concept of ‘development’. Hence, the study also explores the question, what is ‘development’ in Kuttanad?

Through participant observation and interviews, I studied how the society in Kuttanad is linked to the geography of the region. A research into the physical landscape in Kuttanad led me to two challenges faced by the inhabitants – the new land reclamations and floods. A probe into these two issues exposed the development initiatives undertaken in the region. An investigation into the development initiatives revealed the conflicting development perspectives, the contest over natural resources and the prevalence of corruption and misgovernment which engulfed development programmes resulting in environmental degradation in Kuttanad. The study of the physical landscape also involved a probe into paddy cultivation. This exposed the close relation and unity that is necessary for cultivating paddy in Kuttanad and the way it developed a deep bond between the inhabitants and the region until recent past. A scrutiny of the problems faced by the paddy cultivators now, revealed a shift in their attitudes, relations and perspectives with the changing social, economic and political conditions. An examination of the changes in the land utilization patterns exposed how the physical and social landscapes mirrored each other. This prompted my research into the changes happening in the social composition and stratifications.

It has been found that ‘development’ is used as a means to exploit the natural resources in Kuttanad at incredible proportions by both the people and the government for status, power and capital. However, in the process of ‘development’ – both physical and social, the environment is getting neglected resulting in environmental degradation, which is ultimately bringing damage to the people. Hence, my research points at the need to rethink about ‘development’.

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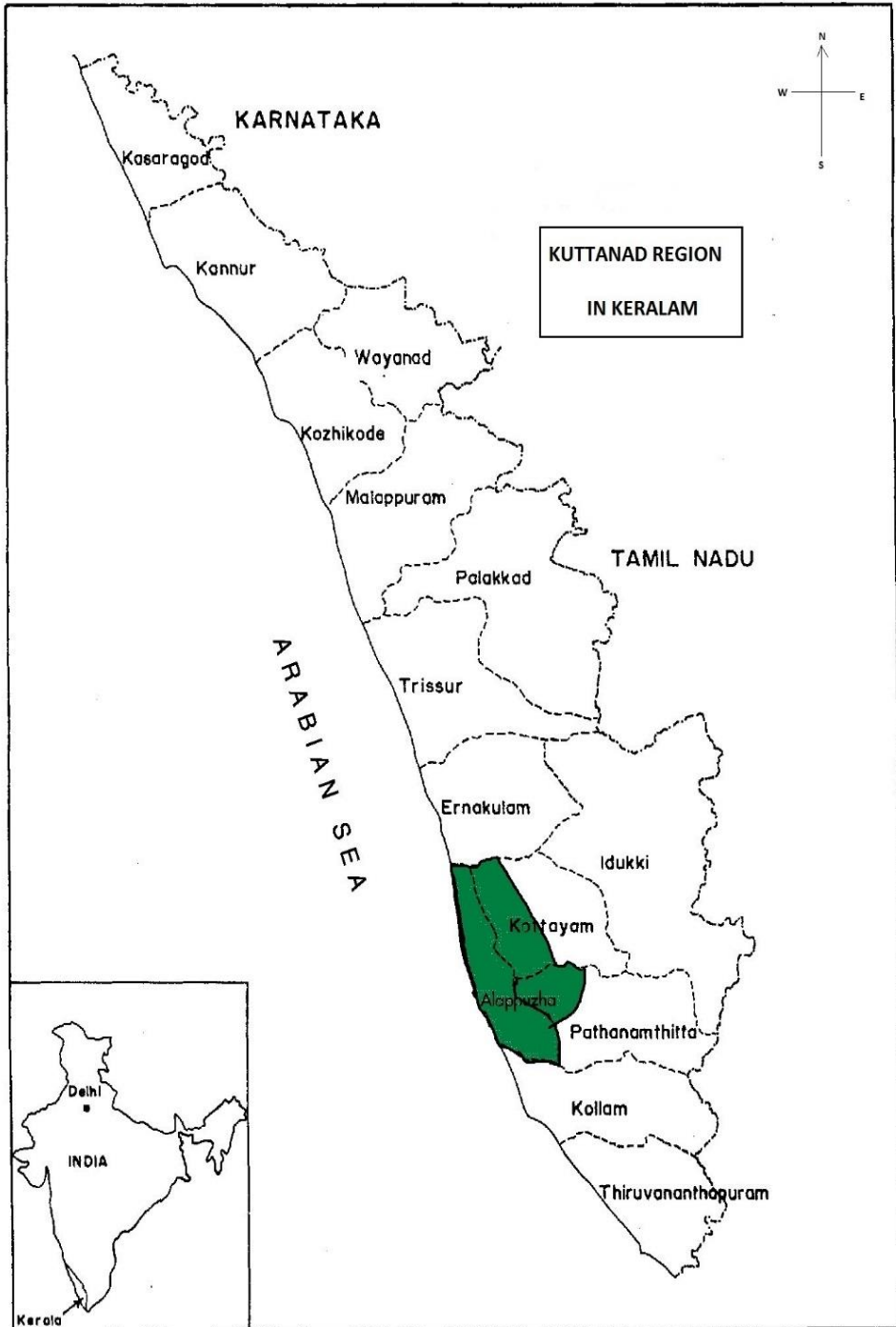
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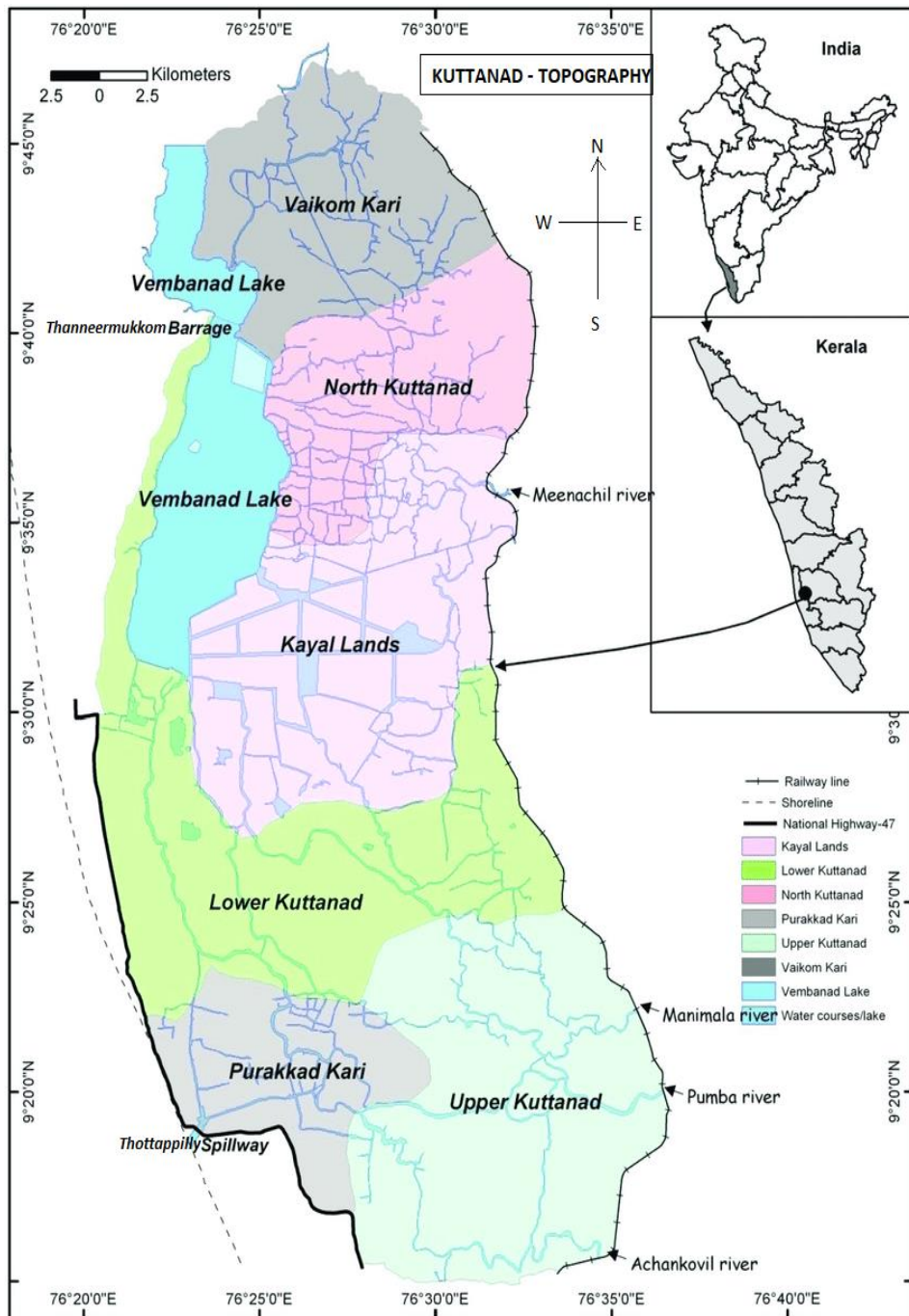
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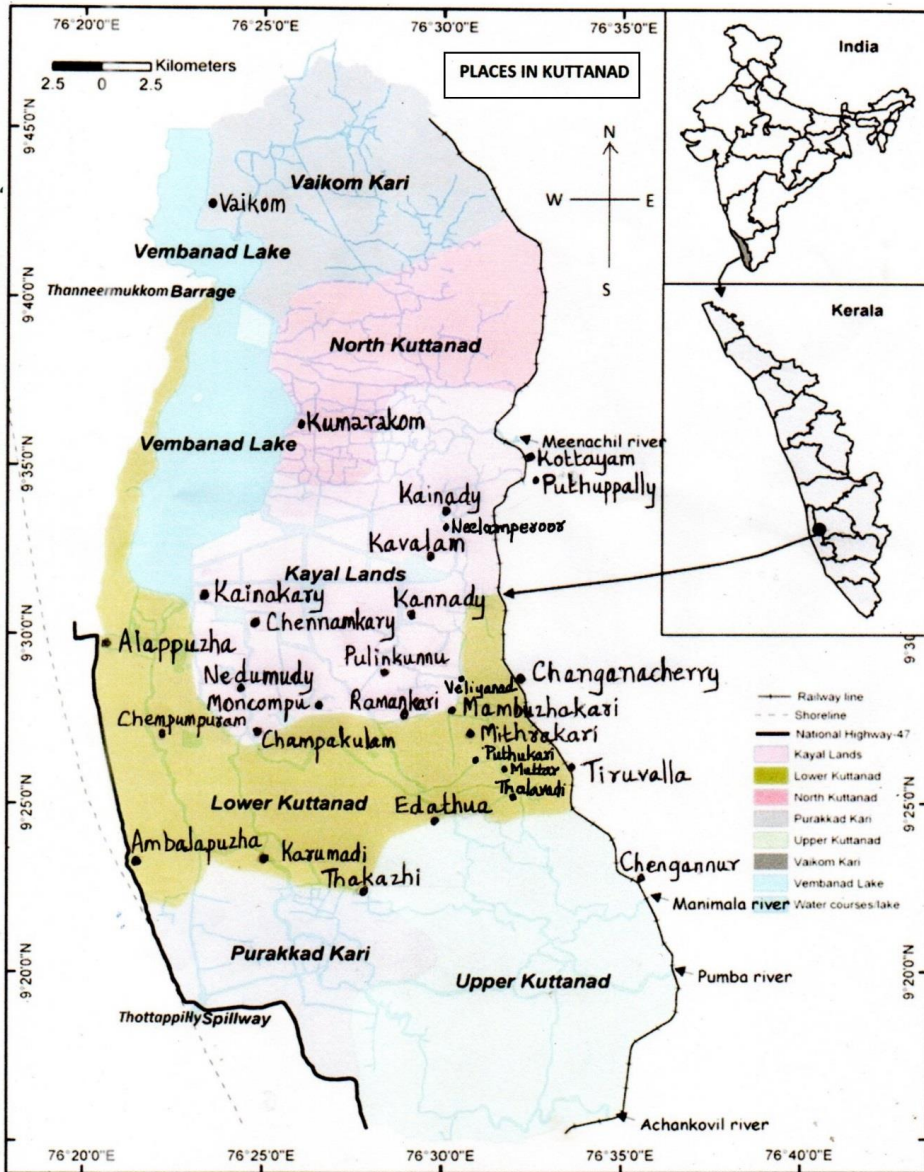
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Chapter 1

(a)

Introduction

There were several buses from Kottayam via Changanassery to Alappuzha passing through the green paddy fields of Kuttanad. It was a highly picturesque trip with rivers and canals filled with lotuses and water lilies on either side of the road, and tall slim coconut trees growing along the paddy fields. Houseboats and canoes moved swiftly through the waterbodies adding to the beauty of the scenery. Flocks of ducks swimming in the water, storks, cranes and kingfishers together gave the pure experience of Keralam as God's Own Country.¹

As the bus moved on, the focus of my attention fell on the physical landscape of Kuttanad; paddy fields, canals, rivers, lakes, and *thuruthukal*. *Thuruthukal* are small groups of islands found in the middle of paddy fields. I noticed that the paddy fields were surrounded by mud bunds and dykes made of clay, coir, banana waste and bamboo to check floodwater intrusion and some of the inhabitants had their houses there. Coconut trees, banana trees, jackfruit trees, cassava, yam, pandanus shrubs, graminaceous plants locally known as *karakam* and other trees were grown on the dykes to strengthen them against the entry of floodwater. It provided a green hue to the landscape. Surrounding these dykes were the canals and rivers that were connected to the backwaters and the lake, which finally flowed into the Arabian Sea. Running almost parallel to the canals and rivers and sometimes intersecting them were the roads. The houses of the inhabitants remained scattered near the paddy fields, the waterbodies and the roads. Everything looked so green, lush and fertile. It was a bit surprising for me, when my informants from all parts of Kuttanad told me that the wetland is increasingly becoming a dryland. In my observation, the region was a highly waterlogged wetland with rivers, lakes and canals forming the major portion of its geography. The statements of my informants aroused my curiosity and an investigation into the physical transformation of the region opened up a wide new world before me, which forms the content of my thesis.

The special geography of this agricultural region had always fascinated me from my childhood. Kuttanad being my mother's native land, and my parents and I living in Kottayam, one of the nearby towns, at a distance of about 50 km or one hour drive, I often visited and stayed in my

¹ Keralam is popularly known in India as 'God's Own Country'. The tag 'God's Own Country' was coined in 1989 by Walter Mendez who was the Creative Director of a reputed Ad agency in India. Walter coined it on request of Kerala Tourism Department, when the Kerala Government wished to market Kerala's high tourism potentialities before the travel world. There is another reason also, why Keralam is known as 'God's Own Country' which is connected with the Hindu mythology. The belief that Keralam was created by Lord Parashuraman, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu by throwing his axe across the sea to create a new land for his devotees to live peacefully also gives way for the label, 'God's Own Country'.

maternal ancestral house at Champakulam in Kuttanad. So for the past thirty-five years, I had been in the field, not as an anthropologist but as a native, seeing and experiencing life in the region. However, in September 2015, I started my fieldwork in Kuttanad for my PhD, as a native anthropologist.

Kuttanad is a major rice producing region in the State of Kerala in the southwest of the Indian peninsula. The distinctive geographical landscape is what makes Kuttanad unique. It is the only region in the world where paddy is cultivated below sea level and the surrounding water level, requiring water to be pumped not 'in' but 'out' of the fields, in order to do cultivation. Here, paddy is cultivated 0.6 metres to 2 metres below sea level. The region has the lowest altitude in India. The area is similar to the Netherlands where land has been reclaimed from the sea and crops are grown. The nature of the region is of great concern in view of the projected sea level rise caused by global warming. Together with the Vembanad *Kayal* (lake) and the huge network of rivers, canals, estuaries, backwaters, floodplains, paddy fields and the ponds, the Kuttanad wetland ecosystem forms the largest wetland ecosystem along the Indian west coast. What makes Kuttanad even more unique is the fact that a major portion of the land area we see, is not natural but human-made. Kuttanad was 'created' by reclaiming land from the surrounding waterbodies.

Location of Kuttanad

Political Location

Kuttanad is an ill-defined area with certain common physical features and cultivation practices. It is not delineated by any fixed boundaries. The borders and boundaries of Kuttanad have shifted from time to time with changing politics in southwest India. However, the region of the region is distinguished not by its political boundaries but by its peculiar geographical conditions. The physical features of the region and the conditions that govern the agricultural life of its inhabitants remain the same and is markedly distinct from the rest of the State. The State of Kerala was formed on 1 November 1956 integrating the United States of Travancore and Cochin and the British Malabar. The Kuttanad region is spread over three districts of the State of Kerala (Alappuzha, Kottayam and Pathanamthitta) with six taluks from Alappuzha District (Ambalapuzha, Chengannur, Cherthala, Karthikapally, Mavelikkara and Kuttanad²), three taluks from Kottayam District (Changanassery, Kottayam and Vaikom) and one taluk from Pathanamthitta District (Thiruvalla). Taluk is an administrative district for taxation

² A new taluk by name Kuttanad was formed in 1956 comprising the low-lying villages transferred from the Changanassery and Kottayam Taluks of Kottayam District and Ambalapuzha Taluk of the then Quilon District.

purposes, typically comprising a number of villages. Among these three districts, Alappuzha District includes a significant portion of the Kuttanad region.

Physical Location

The stretch of land lying to the west of the Western Ghats, which was divided into five topographic divisions during the Sangam period, that is, the first five centuries of the Christian era, is now known as Keralam and is divided mainly into three natural divisions – the highland, the midland and the lowland. These divisions are not clear-cut and often intersperse with one another. The western part of Keralam with successive stretches of sandbars, beaches, estuaries, backwaters, lagoons, canals, ponds, lakes and various other marine landforms constitute the lowland division. Here the area is mostly swampy at many places due to submergence during monsoon floods. The rivers flowing from the Western Ghats discharge their waters and silt in the lowland and hence the region is highly fertile. A major portion of the Kuttanad region lies in this lowland division. The history of these regions is markedly embedded in their geography. As this research is more in the direction of historical anthropology, a knowledge of the history connected with the region is therefore highly important.

History and Myth

Kuttanad is a land of romantic past with history and myth mixed together. It is found mentioned, directly and indirectly, in a number of literary works from the past like the Ramayana, Mahabharatha, edicts of King Ashoka, the work of Megasthenes, the Sangam literature, the travel accounts of Pliny and Ptolemy etc., which points to the fact that the region had been in existence from very ancient times in the Indian subcontinent. However, the ancient history of Kuttanad can hardly be reconstructed with clarity for lack of authentic evidence and materials. This lack of precise information on the ancient land formation of the region lying to the west of the Western Ghats was sought to be remedied by a mythological story of the origin of Keralam – The Parashuraman Legend. According to the legend, the divine hero Parashuraman wanted to carve out a new kingdom. He threw his battle-axe from Gokarnam in Karnataka to Kanyakumari (Cape Comarin) in Tamilnadu and miraculously, the sea receded from this region and Keralam came into being. This story hints that Keralam, which includes Kuttanad, was created by a process of natural reclamation. Even though this is a myth, the basis of the legend of Parashuraman has been substantiated.

A large portion of present day Kuttanad and many parts bordering the Vembanad *Kayal* seem to have been under water in ancient days. Fossils, coral reefs and other marine vestiges excavated from different parts of Kuttanad, the soil type and the local place names indicate that

the region was once under the Arabian Sea. For instance, Vaikom in Kuttanad literally means ‘new land’. The name Kaduthuruthy, presently an inland town, is taken from the words ‘*kadal thuruthu*’ meaning ‘sea land or sea island’. The accounts of Keralam in the writings of early geographers like Pliny (1st century CE) and Ptolemy (2nd century CE) also lend credence to the view that large parts of Keralam were once under water. However, it is also believed that Kuttanad was forested. The *Kandava vanam* (forest) that got destroyed by fire, mentioned in the Epic Mahabharatham, is believed to have been in Kuttanad (Thampatti and Padmakumar 1999). Geological evidence of burnt wood, charcoal and other organic fossils obtained from beneath the land surface show that at some point in time the region was a forest and that it burnt down. Logs of burnt and charred wood are still found in the *Kari nilam*, which literally means coal land or coal field. There are many places in Kuttanad with the suffix *kari* in their names (Ramankari, Mithrakari, Puthukari, Chennankari, etc.) where coal or burnt wood is obtained from beneath the soil. One of the etymologies of Kuttanad, *Chutta nadu*, meaning ‘burnt land’ also points in this direction as shown by Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999). However, due to lack of solid evidence, it is difficult to say when exactly the region was covered with forest and when exactly the sea came in and then receded.

Equally plausible is the theory that the rivers from the Western Ghats may have transported immense quantities of silt and built up huge deltas, which eventually jutted into the sea (Thampatti and Padmakumar 1999). Together with this, the ocean currents may have brought large quantities of sand towards the shore. The place name Kumarakom in Kuttanad supports this view as it is derived from the words *kuminja* and *akam*, which means ‘land formed by the accumulation of sediments’. The coastal belt of Kuttanad may have thus been formed by the accumulation of sand and silt brought in by the rivers and the sea and therefore the western fringes of the area west of the Western Ghats – that is the Kuttanad region may well be of more recent origin than other regions in the Indian peninsula. Moreover, the vast stretches of paddy fields now seen spread all over Kuttanad are much later formations that were developed through large-scale land reclamations by the inhabitants in the 1830s and 1940s.

Statement of the Problem

The physical landscape of Kuttanad plays an important role in this dissertation. Since the large-scale land reclamations of the 1830s and the 1940s that transformed the region into a major rice producing tract in southwest India, the human induced alteration of the landscape has been extremely drastic and dire that the inhabitants are now living confronting the consequences of human actions on the environment. The present research is an exploration of the transformation of the physical and social landscapes in Kuttanad, which is closely related to the political and

economic dynamisms in Kerala, India and the rest of the world. By social landscape, I mean, the social composition, stratifications, relations and the complexities connected with the society. The research involves exploration of the changes happening in the demographic composition and social stratifications in the region. The transformation of the physical and social landscapes in my study area is deeply connected to the concept of 'development'. Hence, the study also explores the question, what is 'development' in Kuttanad?

The argument put forward in this thesis has two sides, which are deeply interconnected. The thesis argues that 'development' is used as a means to exploit the natural resources in Kuttanad at incredible proportions by both the people and the government for status, power and capital. In the process of 'development' – both physical and social, the environment is getting neglected resulting in environmental degradation, which is ultimately bringing damage to the inhabitants. Through this argument, this ethnographically grounded thesis attempts to illuminate the complex linkages between the discourses on development, social stratifications and environment.

Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into eleven chapters.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is divided into (a) and (b). Chapter 1(a) is the introduction to the thesis and Chapter 1 (b) gives a description of the methodology followed in this thesis.

Chapter 1 (a) presents the study area, its geographical location and features a brief history connected with its landscape. It explains the research intentions and provides an outline of the different chapters.

Chapter 1 (b) begins with a narration of the everyday life observed in the region, which provides an idea of the texture of life in the region. A description of the study area that follows encompasses detailed descriptions of three villages and three towns where I did fieldwork. It exposes my social position in my study area. This is followed by information about my informants and how I did my fieldwork.

Chapter 2 sheds light at the theoretical perspectives used in this thesis to analysis the empirical data from Kuttanad. Theoretical discourses connected with social stratification, development

and environment have been applied to weave together the empirical data collected from Kuttanad.

Part I

My ethnography begins from Part I of the thesis. Part I focuses on the physical landscape of Kuttanad and illustrates the complexities connected with the landscape and the inhabitants that dwell in it. It includes Chapters 3 and 4 that deals with two of the major issues that have severe implications on the region and the life of its inhabitants - the land reclamations and the floods. By tracing these two concerns, Part I exposes the alterations made on the physical landscapes of Kuttanad in order to bring changes in the social landscape.

Chapter 3 is about land reclamations done by people that are transforming the physical landscape of the region. The chapter begins with a glimpse into the 'creation' of the region through land reclamations from the 1800s and the evolution of the region as a major rice producing tract. This is followed by an investigation into the new land reclamations observed at the time of my fieldwork that were transforming the region into a non-rice producing tract. The ethnography in this section explains the reasons behind new land reclamations indicating changes in land use patterns and exposing increasing urbanizing trends. This is followed by an analysis of the impact of new land reclamations. This includes a discussion about the reduction in the area under paddy, waterbodies and wetlands and the resultant reduction in the production of rice leading to shortage of rice in the State and secondly a discussion about the environmental impact of new land reclamations.

The discussion about the reduction in the area under paddy draws attention to the increasing importance given to cash crops than food crops in Keralam and its impact on rice production in Kuttanad. The account of the shortage of rice in the State on the one hand discusses the means adopted by the government to overcome the crisis and the problems related with it, and on the other hand shows changing food consumption patterns in the State observed in recent years. All these discussions are centred on the question why Kuttanad should produce rice? The empirical data regarding the environmental impact of new land reclamations sheds light particularly on its impact on paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands. The environment conservation laws, which are the results of resistances against new land reclamations are presented as the next section. Subsequently, illegal land reclamations going on in the region in spite of conservation laws are exposed with three cases as evidences. The chapter ends by presenting an amendment made to the conservation laws by the Kerala Government at the time of my fieldwork that favours land reclamations. Chapter 3 uncovers the changes in the land utilization pattern and

displays the political ecology at work in the background of social mobility projects and spatial reorganizations with the expansion of capitalist developments. It demonstrates the neglect and degradation of environment as development aspirations rooted in social mobility and capitalism sets forth.

Chapter 4 deals with the occurrence of floods and the human efforts to tackle it. This chapter illustrates the alterations made on physical landscapes by the government in the name of 'development' in order to augment profit and to enhance capital and its adverse effects on the inhabitants and the environment. If the intention of the people in altering the physical landscapes in Kuttanad is to bring changes in the social stratifications, the object of the government is to intensify profit from paddy production and to attract investments for enhancing capital. This is demonstrated with the help of six technological and infrastructural developments undertaken in the region by the government to control floods and to increase paddy production. They are the new land reclamations, construction of bunds and dykes, the three development projects under the Kuttanad Development Scheme that is, the Thanneermukkom Bund, Thottappally Spillway and AC Road, and lastly the Green Revolution.

Even though new land reclamations are part of the infrastructural developments in the region, as chapter 3 has already dealt with it in detail, only a very brief account of how it contributes in intensifying floods is given in this chapter. The subsequent description about bunds and dykes includes an account of concrete bunds and mud bunds and the ecology of the region. This is followed by a descriptive account of the three projects under the Kuttanad Development Scheme. After exemplifying the Thottappally Spillway and the Thanneermukkom Bund, the impact of these two projects on paddy cultivation and the environment are discussed, which incorporates an account of its impact on the fish and coconut industries as well. The third project of the Kuttanad Development Scheme, that is, the AC Road is presented after this. It includes a discussion about the defective construction of roads, the corruption involved in the laying of roads and also a discussion about the prevailing water transportation and communication and its potentials. This takes the discussion to the major technological development in Kuttanad, that is, the Green Revolution and its impact on Kuttanad. The chapter concludes with an analysis of developments and environment in Kuttanad on the basis of the empirical data presented in the chapter. Chapter 4 exposes the deplorable state transpired into by a region subjected to development initiatives for making profit and enhance capital, done without regard and understanding of the environment and its inhabitants. It discloses the complexities connected with development in Kuttanad. Thus, both chapters 3 and 4 of Part I exposes the physical landscapes of Kuttanad.

Part II

Part II consists of chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. This Part illustrates the changes happening in the social landscape parallel to the transformations happening in the physical landscape in Kuttanad. It portrays the (changing) relationship between the inhabitants and between the inhabitants and the region, and uncovers the connection between the physical and social landscapes in the region.

By exploring the history of the region, Chapter 5 demonstrates the relationship between the inhabitants, between the inhabitants and the region, and the changes that have happened over the years. After an account of the relationship between the people and the region, the chapter proceeds to explain the landlord-labourer relationship in Kuttanad and the changes over the years. This includes a brief account of the old practice of human sacrifices. Conflicting recollections of four inhabitants who belonged to the landlord and labourer classes have been incorporated to substantiate and demonstrate the divergent viewpoints regarding the relation between inhabitants and between inhabitants and the region in the past. Next is an account of the palpable conditions that brought radical alterations in the old land system, which consist of the coming of casual labourers and the rise and spread of Communism, followed by an account of the further changes in the relationship between the inhabitants of the region. This includes a discussion of the transformation of the concepts *janmi*, *muthalali* (capitalist), *agola muthalali* (global capitalist), *agolavathkaranam* (globalization), *agola muthalalithwam* (global capitalism) and *agola muthalali* (global capitalist). After corroborating the change in the relation between inhabitants and between inhabitants and the region, the chapter proceeds to expose the current unity in a disputed landscape. This is accomplished with the empirical data demonstrating the cooperation and unity needed to cultivate paddy in Kuttanad. Here, a detailed account of the different stages of paddy cultivation below sea-level is provided, pointing at the necessity of collaboration between people belonging to different castes and communities. The chapter concludes by exposing the inhabitants' efforts towards unity in the midst of diversity.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how the changes in the relations between people and the region presented in Chapter 5 affected paddy cultivation. The problems faced by paddy cultivators to produce paddy in the changed/changing social, economic and political conditions are demonstrated in this chapter. The chapter begins with an account of the cost of production, the cost of produce and debt. Subsequently, the chapter explicates the problem of labour shortage in paddy cultivation. Related with labour shortage, the discussion proceeds to education, unemployment, migration and mechanization. The chapter concludes with an analysis about

how paddy is cultivated in a contested geography like Kuttanad. The empirical data in this chapter brings up the challenging circumstances in which the agricultural community produce paddy in Kuttanad. It indicates the transformation of a society located on a transforming terrain and the political ecology behind it. It reveals the struggle between the old and the new formations. The hindrances faced by the traditional community related with their long-established occupation are indications of the changes happening in the society at large. Hence, this chapter sets forth the stage for the next Chapter 7, which looks into the changes happening in the social composition of Kuttanad.

Chapter 7

Chapters 7 and 8 are deeply interconnected and portray the social composition and stratifications I saw at the time of my fieldwork. Chapter 7 introduces the traditional social hierarchy, comprising the different religions, castes and communities that inhabit Kuttanad and explains the competitions and contestations among and between them. The chapter begins with an account of the traditional hierarchy found in Kuttanad and proceeds to give an account of the *Namboodirimar* (members of the Namboodiri caste), Tamil *Brahmananmar* (members of the Tamil Brahmin caste), *Nayanmar* (members of the Nayar caste), *Ezhavanmar* (members of the Ezhava caste), *Pulayanmar* (members of the Pulaya caste) and the Syrian Christians. The chapter discusses the social advancement of these castes and communities over the years and their socio-economic condition at the time of my fieldwork. The discussion includes an account of the attitudes of different castes and communities towards each other. Chapter 7 shows how the old caste structure is deeply embedded in the society of Kuttanad. This paves the way for Chapter 8, which demonstrates the changes happening in the society leading to the emergence of a society based on class and individualization.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 discusses the rise of class and individualization in the society, which is a consequence of the economic and political dynamisms in Keralam and India and illustrates the different ways people are trying to cope socially with the transformations that are taking place. It shows how a persons in a caste society make use of the broader economic and political vicissitudes to raise his and his familial status in the society and restructure and shuffle the composition of the society. The chapter begins with an account of the circumstances that led to the emergence of class and individualization in Keralam, which comprises a discussion on secular education and occupation, migration remittances, new economic policies and the rise of consumer culture. With examples showing the contest between persons within castes and communities and between persons belonging to different castes and communities, this chapter demonstrates how

all these developments made the Kuttanad society an amalgam of caste, class and individualization. The chapter concludes by showing that the new society based on class and individualization found in Kuttanad is a reproduction of the old structure in new forms. The four chapters of Part II are connected to each other and demonstrate the social transformation in Kuttanad.

Part III

Part III consists of chapters 9 and 10. Part III is about 'development' and portrays the importance given to 'development' in Kuttanad. By tracing the development perspectives in Kuttanad, this Part illustrates how development is looked upon as a means to exploit the natural resources in the region by both the people and the government for status, power and capital. It exposes the conflicting development outlooks prevailing in the region and the contest over natural resources.

By demonstrating the development perspectives of the people in Kuttanad, Chapter 9 gives a clear indication of how people regard development as a means to make use of the natural resources in the region to bring changes in the social hierarchy. The ethnography reveals that the inhabitants themselves differ in their approaches and attitudes to development. The conflicting perspectives of the people are demonstrated by dividing them into three groups. Group 1 includes people who have no interest in agriculture. Group 2 includes people who are engaged in agriculture but not so ardent about their occupation and not so concerned about the environment. Group 3 includes the agricultural community who is completely dedicated and occupied with paddy cultivation and other agricultural activities.

Group 1 traces the perceptions of development of those not interested in agriculture. As the group includes those involved in the tourism industry also, the discussion proceeds to tourism industry and development, about homestays and resorts and the pollution, encroachments and environmental damages supposedly done by this industry in their urge to make profit. Group 2 describes the development outlook of landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers, agricultural labourers and absentee landlords in Kuttanad and shows how they easily fall into the traps set by capitalism through consumer culture and how it adversely affects the region. Group 3 presents the development outlook of the agricultural community and their resistance to non-agricultural developments. It provides an account of the Kuttanad Vikasana Samithy (KVS) that supports the agricultural community and their resistances against developments adversely affecting the environment. The case of Thomas Peelianickal, the former director of KVS is provided to augment the understanding of the conditions in Kuttanad.

Subsequently, the achievements of the agricultural community and their conservation efforts are shown along with a discussion of the transformations happening among the agricultural community. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the contested landscape of Kuttanad.

Chapter 10 delineates the development perspectives of the government. As the Government of Keralam is headed alternatively by two political fronts, the development perspectives of the government is traced mainly through the accounts of the politicians belonging to the different political parties, especially the UDF and the LDF. The section on the development of social and physical landscapes is followed by an account of the importance given to infrastructural developments, tourism development and the need to attract investments for developments. The conflicting interests of the agricultural community and the government are exposed along with the importance given to agricultural development by the government. The significance of extensive development together with agricultural development is brought forth. This is accompanied by the importance given by the government to environment conservation. The budget set aside for development is presented, which is followed by an account of corruption and misgovernment in the State. A number of cases of corruption and misgovernment in Keralam are provided. These cases of corruption and misgovernment affirms the possible reason why the development projects and initiatives in Kuttanad fail or remain incomplete or are brought adversely affecting the environment. The chapter concludes with a discussion about developments and environmental degradation.

Chapter 11 forms the concluding remarks of the thesis analyzing the empirical data collected from Kuttanad using the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2.

Epilogue

The conclusion is followed by an epilogue about the catastrophic floods that occurred in Keralam in 2018 at the time of my fieldwork that brought untold devastation in Kuttanad.

Chapter 1

(b)

Methodology

My fieldwork was divided into four different periods during the years spanning 2015 to 2018 so that it was possible for me to be in touch with my study area and note the events that occurred throughout my research period. My fieldwork was done from September 2015 to December 2015, then from November 2016 to January 2017, subsequently from October 2017 to January 2018 and finally from July 2018 to October 2018. Splitting my fieldwork like this helped me to return to the field to make clarifications whenever I was stuck in my writing process and to keep alive the link between myself and my informants during the entire period. I shall begin with a sketch of my study area in order to provide an idea of the texture of the landscapes and a glimpse of life in the places where I did fieldwork.

A Description of my Study Area

As the interest of my research was centred on the reclaimed tracts of Kuttanad that were humanly created and which lie below sea level and being most affected during floods, the major part of my fieldwork was done mainly in Lower Kuttanad and the neighbouring towns of Changanassery, Kottayam and Alappuzha. Kuttanad includes a number of villages that are adjacent and closely interconnected like Kainakari, Pulinkunnu, Chennankari, Kavalam, Kannadi, Champakulam, Puthukari, Ramankari, Moncompu, Mithrakari, Nedumudi, Thakazhi, Mampuzhakari, Kumarakom, Chembumpuram, Karumadi and Thanneermukkom. Even though I visited all these villages during my fieldwork to meet people for interviews and to observe the landscapes, a major part of my fieldwork was done in Champakulam, Kumarakom, Kainakari, Pulinkunnu, Mampuzhakari, Ramankari, Mithrakari, Puthukari and Moncompu. Being a region with virtually invariable physical features, the geographical traits and the daily life found in all these small villages remain almost the same.

Taking strolls through the different villages of Kuttanad was a usual method I employed to observe life in the region and to meet people. I met most of my informants in this way. On the first day of my fieldwork, after getting down from the bus at Mampuzhakari, I walked towards the next village Ramankari, along the Alappuzha-Changanassery Road that lay parallel to the Alappuzha-Changanassery Canal. It is a fairly busy and noisy road with traffic and people. There are shops and vendors on both sides of the road. On the roadside near the canal, I found duck-sellers with ducks and duck eggs, the two popular delicacies from Kuttanad. I also found vendors selling tender coconut along the roadside. Many were stopping their cars to buy these

treats from Kuttanad. I crossed one of the bridges that connected the Alappuzha-Changanassery Road to the outer bund of a large paddy field. Under the bridge flowed the Alappuzha-Changanassery Canal. I crossed the outer bund and walked through the inner bunds of the fields into the interiors of Kuttanad. Paddy fields stretched far and wide everywhere and I found machines, men and women engaged in different activities in the fields. Women, who were part of the guaranteed work scheme known as *Thozhilurappu*, were seen occupied with various works related with the programme in the different parts of the region.³ They were mostly engaged in clearing the waterweeds that filled up most of the waterways in Kuttanad.

As I walked along the inner canals that traversed the region, I saw steps leading from the gardens of houses to the waterbodies, and men, women and children taking bath, washing clothes/vessels and fishing with small rods. There were also fishermen in their canoes, catching fish with their nets. As it was morning time, I saw fishermen coming on cycles, motorbikes and auto-rickshaws with the fish they caught from the backwaters or from the sea near Alappuzha. Some households had their boats and canoes moored onto wooden poles in the front or by the side of their houses. Almost all houses had big or small gardens with some coconut trees, mango trees, banana trees, jackfruit trees and cacao trees. All the time there were boats, canoes and houseboats carrying tourists passing by through the waterways that flowed around the paddy fields. Here and there, I spotted homestays and resorts for the tourists. I observed State boats at regular intervals at the different ferry points I passed where people were seen waiting for the boat services. It reminded me of the old boatmen in my childhood who were phased out by the government boat services. I spotted toddy tappers on coconut trees. After tapping the toddy, they took their toddy jars to the local toddy shops.

There were narrow link roads everywhere in the interiors, cutting across paddy fields and connecting the various places in the different villages. Some of them were tarred and others remained as mud roads. Cars, auto rickshaws and motorbikes were frequent on these roads. Some roads were too narrow for four-wheelers and on such roads, only motorbikes and cycles were used. As I walked further along the newly built narrow link roads, I came across more houses of inhabitants, churches, temples and small teashops, where men, especially the elder generation gathered for small chats. This is how a normal day of my fieldwork in Kuttanad looked like. I shall now provide a description of a number of villages and towns where I did fieldwork and my connections with those places.

³ *Thozhilurappu* or The National Rural Employment Generation Scheme is an employment scheme in India for providing 100 days guaranteed wage employment for all employment seekers above 18 years of age and willing to do work.

Villages

Champakulam

My maternal ancestral house being in Champakulam, I have deep memories and emotions connected to this village. Before I describe my village, I shall provide an account of my social background and position in the field. I belong to a Syrian Christian family. My ancestral family in Champakulam and our relatives spread over the different villages of Kuttanad were former landlords in the region, who owned large tracts of paddy land. According to our family records, in the early 19th century, the Travancore King asked some Syrian Christians living in Kuravilangadu in Kottayam District to move to Kuttanad region to cultivate paddy. It is apparently the entrepreneurial background of Syrian Christians, which prompted the King to invite them to engage in cultivation. Among the twenty-eight families who moved accordingly to Kuttanad included my ancestor named Thommi. He had two sons, Ouseph Thommi and Cherian Thommi. Cherian Thommi is my great grandfather. The King granted land for them to settle down in Vyshumbhagom in Champakulam. Living there, they started reclaiming land from the waterbodies to cultivate paddy. There are archival records available in the Trivandrum Archives showing my family's participation in largescale land reclamations, especially in the early 20th century that contributed in the transformation of Kuttanad into a major rice-producing tract. In addition to owning reclaimed lands and doing cultivation on it, they also leased in land belonging to the Travancore Kings.

As the family expanded in the region, they took various family names such as Kavalackal, Idinjilam, Chempakassery, Ettichira, Chirayil, Koorikkad, Ezhara, Pulpathara, Thundiyl, etc. These families further expanded in the region by marriage alliances with other Syrian Christian families who had also migrated to the region in similar manner from other parts of Travancore. Hence, the family names of my other relatives in the region include Venganthara, Mappilassery, Payyanadu, Mattathil, Thevarkadu, Thachankary, Chavara, Panchara, Powathil, Kurialassery, Vachaprambil, Murickan, etc. Most of my relatives are still actively engaged in paddy cultivation as landlords, absentee landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators. In the past, my family had *Pulayanmar* as attached labourers and also *Ezhavanmar* working for them in the paddy fields. It is my mother's eldest brother who now lives in our ancestral house in Champakulam. He inherited the house, which was built by my great grandfather and which is around 200 years old.

My parents and I lived in Kottayam town from my childhood. I used to visit my mother's house for every vacation. This was in the early 1990s. Coming from Kottayam, we had to park our jeep at a ferry place called Kanjipadam, which literally means 'rice field' near Champakulam,

as there were no roads reaching my ancestral house then. A boatman sent by my uncle, who would usually be a person from the Pulaya or Ezhava caste associated to our family through generations of agricultural relations, would be waiting there for us. Using wooden oars and bamboo poles, he would row the canoe through the backwaters to the house located in the interiors. It was a one-hour trip from Kanjipadam to the house and during the whole time, the boatman would be updating us on the recent happenings in the region. As my relatives' houses are spread along the way, we would find many of them on the way and they all would come to greet us as the canoe moves forward. Some would walk along the banks of the canals for some time in order to talk to us. All this time, the canoe would be slowly moving forward without stopping.

As the house approaches, the canoe would stop in front of the entrance with steps from the courtyard leading to the waterway. Our relatives would be waiting to welcome us at the water entrance. The garden of my ancestral house had a lot of coconut and mango trees. My grandmother had nine or ten cows and the house had a huge haystack filled with hay from the previous harvest. Every morning my grandmother milked the cows by herself. Nights were completely peaceful when the entire village fell into a soothing silence broken only occasionally by the sound of canoes rowing in the dark with kerosene lamps lit by its side. For our trip back after the vacation, there would be sacks filled with different varieties of ripe mangoes plucked from our garden and gifted by my uncle. The whole canoe and later our jeep would be filled with the smell of ripe mangoes.

Times have changed now. Road reached my uncle's house in 2012 making it possible to go there on four-wheelers. In 2017 when I visited him, we went on our car until the house without having to depend on the boatman. Even though the condition of the road was pathetic with gutters, it was a dream come true for my uncle. The old water entrance of the house remained unused and filled with waterweeds. Most of the mango trees have been cut and sold. After my grandmother's death in 2005, all her cows were sold and the hay house is now converted into the garage. My uncle is still engaged in paddy cultivation but his children are not interested in the traditional occupation. His son is settled in Canada with his family and his daughter has been married away to a town outside Kuttanad. The situation in the neighbourhood has also changed. We have *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians as our neighbours. Some distance away, we also have Namboodiri households but I have not seen them much. Many of the neighbouring Ezhava, Pulaya and low caste converted Christian households have generations of agricultural relations with my family. Even today, some members of these families work in the paddy fields owned by my relatives

as hired labourers. Many among them also take our fields on lease and cultivate paddy. We also have cordial relations with the *Nayanmar* in the locality. Many of them were also former landlords in the region.

Many of the neighbours between the age group 30 and 50 have moved to the neighbouring towns or abroad, leaving their parents behind. They are engaged in various kinds of occupations and professions. Some of them remain in the region itself, leasing land for cultivation or engaging in the tourism industry. Most of our neighbours' financial situation have improved considerably when compared to twenty-five or thirty years back. Most of the houses have been renovated into modern style constructions. There were two-wheelers, three-wheelers and four wheelers passing through the different new roads that have come up around our house. The sound of vehicles and horns have trespassed the calmness of the nights. Several homestays and resorts have popped up near our house. Some of them are owned by my own relatives. As it is obvious, this account about Champakulam is derived from my personal life and experience. The next village I have a close affiliation to and which I would like to describe is Kumarakom.

Kumarakom

As a village lying close to Kottayam, I have visited Kumarakom many times in my life. Even from the 1990s, Kumarakom had attained reputation of a popular tourist destination. Accessible by road and water, most of my trips to Kumarakom in the 1990s were to spent time with family and friends at the different resorts that were popping up in the region. In the 1990s and until I started my first research on Kuttanad in 2005, I had no idea about the environmental impact of tourism development and the new land reclamations that were part of this development project. However, the importance of this village in the tourism business has only been increasing ever since. If in the 1990s, there were only a couple of resorts in Kumarakom, now the village is dotted with resorts and homestays all over. Compared to many other villages in Kuttanad, due to tourism industry, Kumarakom is showing more signs of urbanization and developments in that direction, and this is what makes Kumarakom different from the other villages of Kuttanad. It is possible to find more people engaged in tourism business here than in the other villages. However, besides tourism, inhabitants are still seen engaged in paddy cultivation and fishing as major economic occupations. Next, I will give an account of the island village Kainakari, which is geographically distinct from the rest of the villages.

Kainakari

Kainakari is a small island village in Kuttanad surrounded by the River Pampa and other waterbodies. At the tip of Kainakari, River Pampa drains into the Vembanad *Kayal*. No roads

and hence no motor vehicles have reached this part of Kuttanad yet. With no bridges to connect Kainakari to the mainland, I used to take the boat from Alappuzha town to reach this village. As a village surrounded by water, there are boat jetties at several points in the island. The boat services run by Kerala State Water Transport Department to Alappuzha (30 minutes), Kollam (8 hours), Changanassery (3 hours) and Kumarakom (3 hours) are used by my informants to reach the mainland and beyond. My informants lived near the canals and the riverbanks in small colourful concrete houses with concrete roofs. As a prevention against floods, some houses were built on top of concrete pillars or on raised platforms. Some of those who could afford it had boats, and all of them had small canoes. Vast paddy fields make up the major part of the landscape. Inhabitants are mainly engaged in paddy cultivation, fishing and tourism industry as this village stands en route backwater tourism. As life and landscapes in almost all the other villages in Kuttanad are similar, I am abstaining from describing the other villages in order to avoid repetitions. As a person who grew up in a rapidly developing town the slow life I encountered at Kainakari was a contrast. This turns attention to the towns where I did fieldwork.

Towns

Even though a major part of my fieldwork was done in the villages of Kuttanad, some amount of time was also spent in the towns in and near the region. Fieldwork in both villages and towns provided me ample opportunities to observe developments and compare the urban-rural life in my study area. Kottayam, Changanassery and Alappuzha are geographically very close to Kuttanad, bordering and comprising the region that it would be unfair to say that they are not part of the Kuttanad region.

Kottayam

If my maternal link to Kuttanad connects me to the lowlands of Keralam, my paternal links to the Western Ghats connects me to the highlands of the State. With no mountains and hills, my maternal ancestral region is a stark contrast to my paternal ancestral region. I shall provide a brief account of my personal background before I proceed to describe Kottayam and my links to this town. My father belongs to a Syrian Christian family located on the Western Ghats in the Kottayam District. Our family is basically from Aruvithara in Kottayam District. My ancestors were typical entrepreneurs of the time. One of my ancestors named Mathai Vallikappen bought/took on lease large swathes of land from the Poonjar Kings in the hill tracts surrounding Aruvithara. He also had business interests across the border, in the neighbouring Tamil areas of Kambam and Madurai. His son, (my great grandfather), Joseph Vallikappen took charge of much of his father's properties in Teekoy, Marmala, Mavady, Mangalam, Peringulam and Edakkara, many of them originally bought or leased from the Kings of Poonjar. He

expanded the properties and by applying modern management practices, very soon built up a flourishing plantation industry. He planted tea, coffee, rubber, pepper and coconuts and gradually became one of the leading planters of his time. His son, Mathew Vallikappen (my grandfather), established the Mavady Tea Estate and Factory, which was one of the first purely Indian-owned private tea factories in Keralam. In its heydays, Mavady Tea was a well-known brand in central Travancore. Much of my family history is also written as a blog titled ‘Spirit of Meenachil’ by my father’s brother T.M. Vallikappen.⁴ Therefore, like my maternal ancestors who took part in the creation of the paddy fields of Kuttanad in the lowlands of Keralam, my paternal ancestors were part of the formation of the plantation industry in the highlands of the State.

My father received his inheritance from our ancestral properties in Edakkara. It was in 1992 when I was seven years old that my father, after selling all his inheritance, moved from Edakkara to Kottayam, a midland town, which makes me thus connected to the highlands, midlands and lowlands of Keralam. My father’s main intention was to give me good education in one of the famous private schools in Kottayam run by women’s rights activist Mary Roy, the mother of the famous Indian author Arundhati Roy.⁵ Her school, Pallikoodam, is known for its high standards. As the fees was high according to Kerala standards, it was mainly the rich who were able to send their children there at that time. When my family reached Kottayam, we were wealthy, with all the money my father got from the sale of his inheritance. My father had plans to start some business in Kottayam with that money but unfortunately, he failed in all the businesses he started and in twelve years’ time, we gradually moved down from a wealthy to an average family.

Our fall in the economic ladder was a shame to both my paternal and maternal families who were still wealthy and maintained pride in the legacy of our family. However, they all still maintained relations with us. Our descend from a wealthy to an average family helped me to come into close contact with people from both wealthy and average families belonging to both high castes/communities and middle class. It helped me to have friends from all these different layers of the society. Through my personal life, I understood and experienced what it means for a high caste/community to fall down economically in the class hierarchy. I experienced both veneration and humiliation. After completing my Masters in Thiruvananthapuram, I did something very unconventional and unorthodox in my Syrian Christian family by marrying a

⁴ Here is the link to the blog: <http://spiritofmeenachil.blogspot.com/2017/>

⁵ Mary Roy is famous for winning a lawsuit in the Supreme Court in 1986 against the inheritance legislation among the Keralite Syrian Christian community. The judgement ensured equal rights for Syrian Christian women with their male siblings in their ancestral property.

tribal man from the Ulladan tribe, my former husband.⁶ He was my classmate during my Masters. I had to elope and marry in an inter-caste marriage register office in Thiruvananthapuram. In an ambiance of immense tension due to fear whether my relatives would come to thwart the marriage, we got married. Only my friends who were my common friends with my former husband attended the ceremony. The majority of them belonged to low castes and communities. It created shockwaves in my family and a major fraction of my paternal and maternal families cut all their ties with me. It was a complete shame and dishonour for them. In my life with my former husband, I came into close contact with the low castes and communities. I experienced the caste system from the downside and understood their perspectives. Hence, during my life in Keralam, I interacted and intermingled very closely with all social categories from high to low, which in fact helped me in the exploration of the empirical data presented in this thesis, especially the data related with caste.

My marriage to my former husband lasted for almost 4 years but we separated due to certain personal reasons, which has nothing to do with caste. By that time, I had moved to Norway for my higher studies. I started a new relation with a Norwegian who is my husband now and my son's father. My second marriage created even greater shock for both my families. In between these events, for a couple of times, I was down with cancer. As years passed by, some of my family started getting closer to me. One reason for this could be my illness. The other and sounder reason I believe is the fact that my husband is outside the caste/community web in Keralam as he is a foreigner. Hence, it was easier for them to accept him than my former husband. Hence, all these background influenced me during my fieldwork more in a positive manner as it helped me to understand my informants from the different layers of the society.

Now I return to my account of the Kottayam town. I have witnessed the rapid developments happening in Kottayam since 1992. As I recollect my childhood days, I remember that there was very less traffic in the town in the 1990s. There were only a very few shops and they were built in the traditional architectural style with wooden shutters and tiled roofs. There were big round and wide trees all over the town giving shade and the temperature was much lower. Rapid development activities started from 2000 onwards by both the public and private sectors. Trees were cut down. I remember taking part in a protest against cutting down trees by hugging the trees organized by my school. However, disregarding our protests, trees were cut and

⁶ The Ulladan tribe belong to the traditionally disadvantaged people in India who are officially designated as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the Constitution of India. According to the 2011 Census, they comprise of 8.6% of the population of India. In Keralam, the ST population mostly live in the highlands, even though some have migrated to the midlands. There are no tribals in Kuttanad. Even though the tribals have been incorporated into the Hindu religion, in a way, they remain outside the Hindu caste hierarchy. Normally, they are considered as positioned below the lowest caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

developments continued. Now there are very few trees in town, making it extremely hot during the day. New concrete buildings in new architectural styles came up and roads got widened. All the old traditional shops were demolished and in its place, supermarkets and shopping malls have come up. Traffic has increased to such an extent that the widened roads seem congested now, entailing even more widening. It has come to such a state that it is impossible to go to town without avoiding long hours of traffic jams. My life in Kottayam helped me to follow the developments and the spread of urbanization in this town in the last 30 years. Change in the economic condition of people is clearly visible in the changed appearance of Kottayam. However, the ruthlessness of development is seen and felt more in Kottayam than in Changanassery and Alappuzha.

Alappuzha

Having relatives in Alappuzha, I have been to this town quite often from my childhood. A visit to the Alappuzha beach with family has always been a part of the trips. The happy crowd at the beach has increased in the last decades together with the number of vehicles. However, I feel that development in Alappuzha has not been as ferocious as it is in Kottayam. I have always esteemed the big old trees in Alappuzha town. Every time when I visit the town, I look around to make sure that the trees are not cut in the name of 'development' as it happened in Kottayam. Fortunately, development has not yet consumed the big old trees in the Alappuzha town. Many of the old traditional buildings have also been preserved. With a population of 174,164, according to the 2011 Census of India, Alappuzha is a crowded, chaotic town having a highly heterogeneous population of Hindus, Christians and Muslims engaged in a variety of big and small occupations. There are small street vendors to big businesspersons. Because of the beach and the backwaters, tourism is a developing industry here. Even though Alappuzha town is the nearest to Kuttanad region, more than agriculture, it is trade, fishing and tourism that dominates the atmosphere in the town.

Changanassery

Changanassery is the nearest town to my hometown on the way to Kuttanad. It is a small, crowded and congested town with a population of 127,987, according to the 2011 Census of India. The busy, traffic ridden Main Central (MC) Road from Angamaly to Thiruvananthapuram becomes narrow as it passes through this town. The MC Road is the main street in Changanassery town. This street is overcrowded and often jammed with people and traffic. Public and private bus stations are located on either side of this road and there are buses coming in and out of these stations all the time, adding to traffic block. Furthermore, there are auto rickshaw and taxi stands, a movie theatre and numerous shops and enthusiastic street

venders together with hundreds of foot passengers all along this narrow street. Located near the tripoint of Kottayam, Alappuzha and Pathanamthitta Districts, Changanassery is popular in Keralam as a leading trade centre connecting the main three districts. The town is well connected by road, rail and water means of transportation. With twenty-four schools and colleges within a 4km radius of the town, which I know as a frequent visitor to this town, the literacy rate of Changanassery is 97.56%, which is higher than the national urban average of 85% (Census 2011). This town is known for the peaceful coexistence of Hindus, Christians and Muslims and is surrounded by temples, churches and mosques. Apart from passing by Changanassery during my travels between Kottayam and Kuttanad as part of my research, this town has also been an area where I did my fieldwork.

My fieldwork

Being a multisited ethnography, my thesis is built on the information obtained from informants belonging to divergent religions, castes, communities, political parties, occupations, age groups and gender spread across the villages and towns of Kuttanad. Being generally a very sociable and welcoming people, I never found any difficulty in starting a conversation with the people I met during these strolls in the region. My social position might have also contributed in my confidence in the field. In addition to this, being a native of the region and having relatives, friends and acquaintances in almost all the villages and towns in and around Kuttanad, it was easy for me to get in touch with informants. However, I tried not to rely completely on my maternal connections to get informants and instead tried to find informants by myself in order to save my data from preconceptions. This was the reason why I preferred taking walks in the region to meet people. However, in one way or the other, my informants always found out my background and I could never hide my identity in the field. Even though my position as a native and a Syrian Christian obviously influenced the communication between me and my informants and I am aware of the subjectivities that can arise from such a relationship, my position as a researcher also helped to situate myself as an outsider.

Paddy cultivators being the majority in the region, I spent a major part of my fieldwork with them in the paddy fields in the different villages. I followed cultivation processes in this way. It helped me to meet paddy cultivators belonging to different castes and communities and to widen my contacts. Kuttanad Vikasana Samithi, an NGO in the region was also a platform for me to study about the region. I attended local meetings, gatherings and festivals where I observed and met people. On such occasions, I often got appointments for interviews. I also visited a number of temples and churches in the region. Apart from meeting people, it helped me to collect materials related with religious matters. The Ayyappan temples in Thakazhi and

Ramankari, and the Devi temple and the Bhadrakali temple in Mithrakari are some of the temples I visited. The St Joseph's Church in Ramankari and St. Mary Basilica in Champakulam are two of the churches I often visited. I also popped in the Kudumbasree Office at Ramankari, the NSS Office in Changanassery, the Kerala Cheramar Sangham, the SNDP centres at Ramankari and Mithrakari and the Communist Party Offices at Moncompu and Alappuzha where I interviewed people as well as collected secondary sources on several topics I have included in this thesis. Government offices in Moncompu, Thakazhi and Karumadi were also centres of my fieldwork. I met quite a number of bureaucrats and politicians in these offices. In addition to interviews, I was also able to collect various government reports, studies and records connected with development and other topics from these offices. I also visited the various resorts and homestays in Kumarakom, Champakulam, Kainakari and Moncompu to learn about tourism development.

Mostly participant observation was employed during the major part of my fieldwork by being with the inhabitants throughout the day, observing them and their activities, asking questions, clearing doubts and seeking their opinions and viewpoints on various concerns related with the region. Most of my interviews were done in this manner while my informants were engaged in their daily routines and activities. Sometimes, there would be just one person and sometimes two or more people. It was always possible to find inhabitants in groups, for example in the paddy fields, teashops, auto or taxi stands, etc. where it was possible for me to start a group discussion about different topics. I wanted my fieldwork to be in such a way that I did not obstruct their daily life. However, I did make some formal interviews as well, with a number of 'important' inhabitants, government officials and politicians in the region.

I always kept an updated list of pre-prepared, open-ended questions. I often discussed the same topics/issues and raised the same questions concerning Kuttanad to the various people I met in the different parts of the region to know the views of people. This is in addition to the other new topics that always came up for discussion and observations. Depending on the context and the topic discussed, I have categorized my informants accordingly in the thesis. This is a reason why it is possible to find in the chapters, two or more people from various places having similar answers or views about the same topic. This method helped me to compare and know the views of inhabitants in different locations. Being a native of the region, I have good grasp of the Malayalam language spoken in the region and a decent understanding of the different places. These were helpful for me during my research and fieldwork. While doing fieldwork, I felt that my nativity often blended me into the landscapes in Kuttanad that I did not stand out as a 'researcher' in the field.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I collected historical data and secondary sources to support my observations and findings from various archives and libraries. I also made use of newspaper reports and blogs. I visited various libraries in Thiruvananthapuram like the Kerala Council for Historical Research Library, the Centre for Development Studies Library, Kerala University Library and the Kerala archives in Thiruvananthapuram. In Kottayam, I visited the libraries of the School of Social Sciences, the CMS College Library and the Kottayam Public Library. I also used the archives of the press offices in Kottayam like that of Malayala Manorama and Deepika. Since 2005, I have been doing research on various topics related with Kuttanad as part of my University studies. Hence, data collected as a researcher for my previous researches in Kuttanad have also been of great help in my present research. The secondary sources I collected have been used as evidences and facts to support my ethnography in order to validate my argument. Therefore, the present thesis is a combination of participant observation, interviews and secondary sources.

My Informants

Religions and Castes

My informants are primarily Hindus and Christians as they form the majority in the villages of Kuttanad.⁷ They are found in all the villages and towns where I did fieldwork. My analysis of the different castes and communities is not limited to my PhD study period but extends to my entire life as a native of this region. The Hindus in the region includes *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar*. Among the Hindus, Kuttanad includes the various sub-castes within the main caste categories. For example, *Nayanmar* includes Nair, Kurup, Pilla, Menon, Kartha, Kaimal and Panikkar. During my interviews of some members of the NSS Office in Changanassery, I was told that even though the Veluthedathu and Vilakkithala found across Kuttanad consider themselves as *Nayanmar* and are included in the caste, the others within the caste do not recognize them. Even though the people I interviewed did not tell it openly, I assume that this is because they are engaged in lowly occupations as washermen and barbers and are included in the OBC reservation category that they are looked down upon by the other *Nayanmar* who consider themselves as a high caste. In Kuttanad, the *Ezhavanmar* call themselves *Ezhavanmar* and the only sub-caste found in the region is the Panikkar. Similarly, the *Pulayanmar* called themselves Pulayar and I did not come across any subcastes within the caste. I got these information from the NSS Office, the SNDP Offices and the Kerala Cheramar Sangham in Kuttanad.

⁷ There are very few Muslims in the areas where I did fieldwork. The Muslim population is concentrated more in panchayat borders of the Kuttanad region and in the towns of Alappuzha, Changanassery and Kottayam. They are involved in business and trade and are not engaged in paddy cultivation.

Even though, there are several sub-castes within the main caste categories in my study area, in the thesis I have mentioned my informants only by the main caste categories. One main reason behind this is that being a native, ethically it was difficult and embarrassing for me to ask people their caste. Normally, in my experience as a native it is very rare and awkward to ask people their caste openly in public. It is much easier and common to ask people their occupation or political affiliations but not their caste. It would create complete unease and discomfort especially in a group involving both high and lower castes and communities. Normally, as people are aware of this, they avoid such queries and would consider it absolutely rude to pose such a question. This situation indicates the prolongation of the shame connected with caste even to this day. Even if it was very embarrassing for me, as this was part of my research, I asked people their caste/community but only when I met them separately. I never asked caste/community in groups or in gatherings. The second reason why I have included only the main caste categories is that when I asked people their castes, they normally only told me the main caste names. When they said like that, I did not feel like digging further into their vulnerabilities.

Among the Christians, even though the region includes people belonging to different denominations, my focus lies on the Syrian Christians and the low caste converts to Christianity. Moreover, I am writing about the Syrian Christians as a group, regardless of their denominations. Similarly, there are converts from different low castes to Christianity. It was difficult for me to distinguish between the various denominations, as they all appeared and functioned in a similar manner. Hence, I am writing about the low caste converts in general in my study area, irrespective of denominations. Among the low caste converted Christians, it was the Latin Catholics who were doing well in my study area. However, when I use the term ‘low caste converted Christians’ in the thesis, it includes the Latin Catholics. The majority of my informants were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, and Syrian and low caste converted Christians. I had only a very few Namboodiri and Tamil Brahmin informants.

Political Parties

The political parties active in Kuttanad are Indian National Congress, Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (Mani) Nationalist Congress Party, Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist). My informants included politicians and others who belonged to different political parties. Those belonging to the different political parties are so divergent that it was not really possible for me to group them into compartments. For example, a Syrian Christian could be supporting any of the political parties in Kuttanad. At the same time, those Syrian

Christians supporting one particular political party might be engaged in divergent occupations. This is the same with regard to all castes and communities in the region. I met politicians during the various political, social and cultural meetings and gatherings in the region. Political processions, rallies and protest meetings were also venues where I met them. I also visited some in the party offices. I met some others randomly in different parts of Kuttanad also.

Occupations

My informants broadly include those engaged in agriculture and those engaged in occupations other than agriculture. I have used the terms ‘agricultural community’ and ‘non-agricultural community’, to describe them.

Agricultural Community

The agricultural community includes paddy cultivators, fishermen, coconut cultivators and those engaged in animal husbandry. However, this does not mean that they can be grouped tightly in this manner because there are paddy cultivators who are also engaged in fishing or coconut cultivation, or fishermen engaged in coconut cultivation, or those engaged in all at the same time to some degree and so on. All of them together form the majority of the population in Kuttanad. Among them, those engaged mainly in paddy cultivation form the largest group. The paddy cultivators include landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers. It was hard also to compartmentalize the paddy cultivators because among them, there are people who are fully engaged in paddy cultivation and those who are partly engaged in it. And among them there are people with different perspectives and attachments to paddy cultivation/agriculture. The divergence in the perspectives of the inhabitants is presented in Chapter 9 in the three different groups of inhabitants. Even though, those fully and partly engaged in agriculture who are presented as Group 2 in Chapter 9 form part of the agricultural community, when I use the term ‘agricultural community’ in this thesis, I mean only those who are fully engaged in and dedicated to paddy cultivation/agriculture and who are presented as Group 3 in Chapter 9.

Non-agricultural Community

Those inhabitants engaged in occupations other than agriculture and have no connection to agricultural activities are termed as the non-agricultural community in this thesis. Presented as Group 1 in Chapter 9, they are engaged in divergent occupations. Even though some of them live in Kuttanad, most of them have migrated to places outside the region. The bureaucrats and most of my politician informants who have no affiliations to agriculture also belong to this group. All these people engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural occupations are part of

divergent political parties, they belong to different religions and are from various castes and communities. In total, I worked with around 300 informants belonging to agricultural and non-agricultural community from the different villages and towns in Kuttanad. Anonymity of informants has been maintained, as the research includes complex issues related with caste and politics. Hence, the names of informants have been changed. However, the social, economic and political situation of informants have not been changed.

My interaction with inhabitants from different villages and towns provided me with diverse and comparable ethnographic material, which I have presented in this thesis. This brings an end to my methodology chapter. I now proceed to the next chapter, that is, Theoretical Perspectives.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Perspectives

Three main discourses within anthropology are applied for the analysis of my empirical data – social stratification, development and environment. The unique and intimate relationship that exists between people and environment in Kuttanad makes the relation between people and land an important aspect in the present research. However, I do not intent to plunge deep into the much debated nature-culture dichotomy within anthropology. Instead, my focus is more on the transformation in the relation between people and land in the background of ‘developments’ and how people make use of natural resources for social, economic and political benefits, which are eventually bringing adverse effects on the environment. My analysis begins with an understanding of the different meanings people find in places and the role of places in the formation of identities.

Role of Places in Identity Formations

The physical landscape of Kuttanad is a storehouse of the inhabitants’ past. It embodies everything that influenced their evolution to how I found them at the time of my fieldwork. Hence, more than simply a stretch of geographical expanse where the inhabitants worked for their livelihood, the nature seemed to be abundant and rich with their history, memories and sentiments. These produced an exceptional relationship, beyond what is immediately discernible between the inhabitants and the region. This brings attention to what Rodman (1992) wrote about multilocality and multivocality of places. She showed that more than a setting for an action or a stage on which things happen, places can be as rich and polyphonous an expression as the voices of its inhabitants. For each inhabitant, a place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people. She noted that a single physical landscape could be multilocal in the sense that it could express the meaning given to it by different users. In other words, it conveys the idea that a single place may be experienced quite differently. Hence, place becomes a construction of the contests and tensions between different actors and interests. By linking multilocality to multivocality, she showed how places represent people and how people embody places. By exposing the fact that places embody the spoken and unspoken voices of people, she is revealing the formulation of identity through social construction of places.

Emphasizing the idea that places are socially constructed and take part in the formation of identities, Joniak-Luthi (2015) also stated that a place must be understood as multiple and plural. Exploring how a place was established and lived in Xinjiang by the members of the

area's two largest ethnicities - the Uyghur and the Han, she showed that there were differences in the ways different ethnic groups imagined and lived in the same place and established different relationships with a place. She showed that while collective identities like ethnicity deserve recognition as significant paradigms in how a place is imagined and practiced, places are sensed differently not only because of different ethnic identities but also in order to reinforce ethnic boundaries, ethnic identity and ethnic solidarity. In other words, spatial practices and imageries constituted an important part of the intricate process of ethnicity. She asserted that the establishment of specific spatial relationships and practices should be seen as not only reflective of ethnicity but also, if we understand ethnicity as a process of differentiation and boundary maintenance between us and them, constitutive thereof.

By portraying the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over, Feld and Basso (1996) showed the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities. They argued that as people fashion places, so too, do they fashion themselves. According to them, people do not just dwell in comfort or misery, in centers or margins, in place or out of place, empowered or disempowered but everywhere, people act on the integrity of their dwelling. By evoking the ways in which people experience, express, imagine, and know the places in which they live Feld and Basso indicate the social construction of places and the role of places in the formation of identities.

In this setting, the studies made of the different castes in Keralam by Jeffrey (1976), Verghese (1982), Visvanathan (1993), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015), Gallo (2017) and Thomas (2018) gain importance as they shed light on the meanings conferred to landscapes in Kuttanad, especially to the paddy fields by the different castes and communities in the region. These studies indicate the role of landscapes in the formulation of identities. The paddy field, which is the work place of low castes and communities like the Pulaya caste are viewed and related differently by the different castes and communities. The study made by Osella and Osella (2000) conveys the enthusiasm of the Ezhava caste to distance themselves from the paddy fields, which associated them with the Pulaya caste. The association of the Ezhava caste with the coconut gardens by way of their traditional occupation of toddy tapping is well illustrated by them. In their study, it is possible to see how the Ezhava connection to the coconut gardens affected their identity in their attempts towards social mobility.

Gallo's (2017) description of the *illam*, the Namboodiri household, demonstrates the sense of place of the Namboodiri caste and the power held by the places where these households were

located in the past. Their location near temples bestowed a sacred touch to it as if they were the abode of the Gods themselves. From Gallo's description, it is possible to perceive how the location, architecture and internal spatialization of *illangal* (plural for *illam*) is often recalled by the Namboodiri caste in the presentation of their self and in making sense of their contemporary class location. Hence, it is possible to grasp that the architectural styles and the location of houses demonstrated the identity of the different castes in the social hierarchy. The same can be discerned with regard to Nayar, Pulaya and Syrian Christian houses. The location and style of the Pulaya houses around the polluted paddy fields and that of the Nayar and Syrian Christian houses near temples and churches indicate the distance between these castes in the social hierarchy (Verghese 1982, Mohan 2015, Thomas 2018).

Considering the religious conversion of the Pulaya and Paraya communities to Christianity and its new spiritual and material worlds as a central premise, Mohan (2015) is actually pointing at the attempts of these low castes to move away from manual labour in the paddy fields and the slavery connected with it. Exposing the material circumstances by which slavery was experienced by the low castes, and the transformations that these communities struggled for, he explained how both actual suffering and its narrativisation shaped the retelling and experiences of Dalit selfhood. His account of the Pulaya narration of their memories connected with slavery pinpoint how the slave experience of the Pulaya caste is connected to the landscapes, making the landscape an embodiment of the wide experience of caste system. The association of the Pulaya caste identity with the paddy fields is thus clearly visible in his study.

From the studies of Jeffrey (1976), Verghese (1982), Visvanathan (1993), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015), Gallo (2017) and Thomas (2018), it can be comprehended that the association of the Namboodiri and Nayar castes and the Syrian Christians with landownership and the association of the Ezhava and Pulaya castes and the low caste converted Christians with manual labour especially in the paddy fields and coconut gardens made them relate differently to the same landscapes. The way they related to the landscape influenced the way they related to each other and this played an important part in the formulation of their identities, as I will show in the chapters of this thesis. I have included theories on social stratifications later in this chapter and hence I limit my discussion here to the meanings attached to places and the role of the places in the formation of identities.

New Ways of Spatiating Identities

When Rodman (1992), Joniak-Luthi (2015) and Feld and Basso (1996) write about how landscapes and people embody each other and the meanings people attach to landscapes and its

role in identity formations, Hegel (1997), Gupta and Ferguson (1997) and Tuan (1975) writes about the changed conditions following global transformations and the new ways landscapes form identities. At a time when cultural differences are increasingly becoming deterritorialized because of migrations and transnational culture flows, novel ways of spatializing identities are emerging. Hegel (1997) noted that as a result of the global transformations linked to revolutions in technologies of production and communication as well as to massive reconfigurations of geopolitical power and populations worldwide, familiar geographies are uprooted from their original territorial sites and attached to new locations. These changes alter the relationship between geography and history. The deterritorialization and the reterritorialization that follows, affects the social constructedness of space and the geographical grounding of histories. This, he argued, affected the people's attachments to their places of origin. Thus, in his view, changes in physical geography effects the people's relation to the place of origin, which can also be taken to mean, their identity.

Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have a similar line of thought. By stressing that place making always involves a construction, rather than merely a discovery, of difference, they emphasized that identity neither 'grows out' of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead, a mobile, often unstable relation of difference. According to them, identity and alterity are therefore produced simultaneously in the formation of 'locality' and 'community'. Rather than simply a domain of sharing and commonality, culture figures as a site of difference and contestation. Rather than following straightforwardly from sharing the same culture, community or place, identity emerges as a continually contested domain. The construction of difference is neither a matter of recognizing an already present commonality nor of inventing an identity but an effect of structural relations of power and inequality. Emphasizing the complex and sometimes ironic political processes through which cultural forms are imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed, they argued that the immediate experience of community is constituted by a wider set of social and spatial relations. Hence, according to them, the question of identity demonstrates the intertwining of place and power in the conceptualization of culture. Hence, Hegel (1997) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997) point that identity of people may not always be rooted in a place.

The various studies on the various aspects related with migration from Keralam made by Zachariah et.al (1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002) and Zachariah and Rajan (2004, 2007 and 2012) indicate the changed conditions following global transformations and the new ways landscapes form identities. Even though they are writing more about the socio-economic and demographic consequences of migration in Keralam, the impact of remittances on Kerala's economy and

society, the employment and unemployment problems related with migration, the rehabilitation problems related with returned emigrants in Kerala and the working conditions of Kerala emigrants in the Gulf countries, it is possible to comprehend from these studies, the impact of migration on the relation between people and places and its role in the formation of new identities. Even though, they do not say it explicitly, implicitly these studies show the emergence of new ways of spatializing identities at a time of increasing migrations and transnational culture flows. Indirectly, they show familiar geographies being uprooted from their original territorial sites and attached to new locations altering the relationship between geography and history. It can be inferred from these studies that the deterritorialization and the reterritorialization that follows, affects people's attachments to their places of origin and their identity. In a way, they show how migration affects the relation between people and places and its influence in the formulation of identities in the direction of what Hegel (1997) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997) showed. Hence, it could be understood from these studies that migration and deterritorialization can create a different sense of place and attachments to places. This sheds light at what Tuan (1975) wrote about attachments to places.

Analyzing the attachments people have towards places Tuan (1975) asserted that living in a place need not always generate attachments for everyone. According to him, place is a center of meanings constructed through experience over time by individuals and groups. He noted that places can be not just villages, towns or cities but it can also be a home, a fireplace, a dining table, etc. According to him, most places remain unnamed and unidentified because much of human experience is subconscious and so most of the places are not given explicit recognition, acknowledging it at the conscious verbalizing level. Hence, the sentiment about a place is there, but the sentiment often does not rise to the surface of our consciousness. We learn how strong it is only when these small foci of our world are disturbed or threatened. Tuan notes that experience takes time and sense of place is rarely acquired in passing. To know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement. To know a place is also to know the past. If it takes time to know a place, the passage of time itself does not guarantee a sense of place. If experience takes time, the passage of time itself does not ensure experience. One person may know a place intimately after a five-year sojourn; another has lived there all his life and it is to him as unreal as the unread books on his shelf. The contrast is not between abstract knowledge and a personal knowledge that cannot be expressed, for it is possible to live and yet not be alive, so that the years melt away with no impress on either mind or sensibility. Therefore, place is a construct of experience; it is sustained by the quality of human awareness. In this way, Tuan exposes that the extent of attachments people have towards places can vary depending on the meanings they find in it. This could also be a reason for commodification of land and the

increasing consideration of land as a commodity for exploitation. This brings attention to the viewpoints put forward by Ingold (2000).

In Ingold's (2000) view, humanity considers the world as an object of transformation. There is a triumph of technology over cosmology. Traditional cosmology placed the person at the centre of an ordered universe of meaningful relations and enjoined an understanding of these relations as a foundation for proper conduct towards the environment. Modern technology, by contrast, placed human society and its interests outside the 'physical world' and furnished the means for the former's control over the latter. Cosmology provided the guiding principles for human action within the world but technology provided the principles for human action upon it. Thus, according to Ingold, as cosmology gives way to technology, the relation between people and the world is turned inside out, so that what was a cosmos or lifeworld, becomes a world – a solid globe – externally presented to life. Ingold explains this using the contemporary debate about the environment giving significance to the image of the globe. The lifeworld, imaged from an experiential centre, is spherical in form, whereas a world divorced from life is imaged in the form of a globe. From a global perspective, it is on the surface of the world, not at its centre, that life is lived. The world does not surround us, it lies beneath our feet. The notion of the global environment, far from marking humanity reintegrate into the world, signals the culmination of a process of separation. Ingold asserts that once the world is conceived as a globe, it can become an object of appropriation for a collective humanity. Images of property abound. The very notions of destruction and damage limitation, like those of construction and control, are grounded in the discourse of intervention (Ingold 2000:215). Human beings launch their interventions from a platform above the world, as though they could live on or off the environment, but are not destined to live within it. Ingold's analysis of the commodification of places brings attention to capitalist developments and the meeting of the capitalist lifeworld with the local lifeworlds.

The Global-Local Connection

Brosius (1999) and Biersack (2006) highlighted the clashes that occur during the meeting of two lifeworlds. Biersack (2006) emphasized the conflicts that locally emerge when the local nature regime and the capitalist nature regime meet – the tension that is between an ecology that is embedded in society and an ecology that operates independently of socio-moral considerations. In her study, Biersack showed how gold mining in Ipili in Papua New Guinea depended very much on the way in which the capitalist nature regime brought with it, interacted with the Ipili nature regime. According to the author there is a conflict that occurs by this

interaction, a conflict that can be reduced to neither regime but that must be understood in terms of their articulation within a politics of place that arises out of this articulation.

Similarly, examining the process of institutional development with reference to an international rain forest campaign that focused on Sarawak, East Malaysia, Brosius (1999) exposed the encounter between the ecological and economic. Revealing the environmental politics within institutions for local, national and global environmental governance, he showed how such institutions inscribe particular forms of discourse, simultaneously creating certain possibilities and precluding others, privileging certain actors and marginalizing others. Apparently designed to ameliorate environmental destruction, he pointed out that these institutions may obstruct meaningful change through endless negotiation, legalistic evasion and compromise among stakeholders. Moreover, he noted that they insinuate and naturalize a discourse that excludes moral or political imperatives in favor of indifferent bureaucratic and techno-scientific forms of institutionally created and validated intervention. Thus, Brosius also exposed the rendezvous between two different lifeworlds and the commotions that arise from the meeting.

Tsing (2005 and 2015) likewise wrote about global interconnections and its consequences. By presenting the global economic connections between different local regimes of production and supply, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Tsing (2015) exposed how capitalism connected the local to the global. In her multispecies ethnography, she portrayed the globalized trade of Matsutake mushrooms connecting various local and global actors together to supply Japanese consumers with Matsutake, which is an important cultural product for them, as it no longer grows in Japan. By exposing that Matsutake mushrooms grow only in poor, disturbed soils often created by human induced degradation, she emphasized the environmental disturbance and destruction caused by capitalistic developments. However, the emergence of Matsutake mushrooms, which was a precious product of global economic significance in degraded landscapes, symbolized the possibility of renewal and offered a glimmer of hope amid precarity. In this way, Tsing provided hope by demonstrating the possibilities of survival in capitalist ruins. Calling attention to what manages to live despite capitalism, she stated that in this global state of precarity, we do not have choices other than looking for life in this ruin. Even though Tsing is exposing the possibilities of survival despite the destructions caused by capitalism, she showed that such survivals often followed the salvage rhythms of capitalism. By showing how peri-capitalist spaces are used by capitalists in capital accumulation, she demonstrated how capitalism amassed wealth without rationalizing labour and raw materials but simply by acts of translation

across varied social and political spaces. Hence, Biersack, Brosius and Tsing presents the meeting of the capitalist and local lifeworlds. What is the outcome of this rendezvous?

Presenting a critique of capitalism by tracing the attitude of peasants who were new to modern wage labour situations in Cacua Valley in Columbia, Taussig (1977) in stated that a peasant society or community could be involved in commodity production based on exchange value but this need not be its total culture. He stated that the interaction between two lifeworlds does not result in the extinction of one lifeworld. Exposing the clash between the use value orientation and the exchange value orientation he argued that a community can in many ways be affected and even controlled by the wider capitalist world, but this in itself does not necessarily make such a community a replica of the larger society and global economy. In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Tsing's (2005) viewpoint is similar to that of Taussig. By displaying the cultural processes in which predatory business practices and local empowerment struggles variously constructed, imagined and inhabited the Indonesian rain forests, she exposed the heterogeneous elements that entangled in processes of globalization. She exposed the dynamic through which different kinds of knowledge and culture came into contact with one another. By presenting the conjunctures where cultures are made and remade and localized and globalized, Tsing argued that cultural diversity is not banished from interconnections. Conversely, it is what makes them and all their particulars possible. She asserted that cultures are continuously co-produced in the interactions.

According to Sahlins (2000: 493), in any local sector of the global system, the transformation assumes the dual appearance of assimilation and differentiation. The local people articulate with the dominant cultural order even as they take their distance from it, jiving to the world beat, while making their own music. Pointing at the indigenous way of coping with capitalism, he showed how capitalist forms in alien contexts acquire novel local accents. The first commercial impulse of the people when they come in contact with foreign goods is to turn them to the service of domestic ideas, to the objectification of their own relations and notions of the good life. For the local people, the traditional culture has its superior values, but refrigerators, outboard engines, and television sets were not among them. Modern culturalism includes the demand to have these things, or more precisely, to domesticate them. He showed that defenders of the indigenous order are prepared to make useful compromises with the dominant culture, even to deploy its techniques and ideals in the course of distinguishing their own. He stated that actions that are at once indigenizing and modernizing appear as structural rather than hypocritical. He wrote that local politics become means or expressions of a larger process of structural transformation with all the characteristics of a structure of differences. Thus he

emphasized the dual appearance of assimilation and differentiation when two different lifeworlds meet.

Appadurai (2000a) argued that what those who argue about the homogenization process of globalization fail to point out is that as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies (as a result of globalization) they tend to become indigenized in one or another way. Hence more than the world getting homogenized it is the creation of new cultural forms that are being created. He pointed out that for polities of smaller scale, there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale. Hence, globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization but it involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization, which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies only to be repatriated as heterogeneous dialogues of national sovereignty, free enterprise, etc. The State becomes the arbiter of this repatriation of difference. But this repatriation of difference, Appadurai states, continuously exacerbates the internal politics of homogenization, which is most frequently played out in debates over heritage. Thus, in his opinion, the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another. He stated that both sides of the coin global cultural process today are products of the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures. Hence, Taussig (1977), Tsing (2005), Sahlins (2000) and Appadurai (2000a) wrote about the outcome of the rendezvous of the capitalist and the local lifeworlds. At this point, the question that needs to be raised is what is the impact of the change in the meanings and attachments of people towards their places, which leads to the commodification of land for exploitation, and the meeting of the capitalist and local lifeworlds, on the social stratifications in Kuttanad?

Social Stratifications

Emphasizing the notion of encompassment, with 'caste' as the central problematic, Dumont (1980) argued that caste is a system of hierarchy based on inequality, which is reproducing itself in new forms. He showed that modernity in any form has never been able to change it. For Dumont, the core ideological facet of the Indian social system are the concepts of purity and impurity. The unity of the opposites, purity and pollution, provides adequate ground for defining the totality of caste positions and relations as a system. In his view, these two poles are equally necessary, although unequally valued. Similarly, underscoring the notion of encompassment, Dumont explained status and power as two opposing principles, built upon the notion of purity and impurity. According to him, power is subordinate to status in its direct

relationship to it and is assimilated to status in a secondary capacity in opposition to everything else. Hence, in his viewpoint, status encompasses power. It encompasses political and economic power. Political-economic power is not autonomous or exterior to status but remain in a subordinate position to status. Status does not depend on political and economic power and has a penetrating authority over political-economic power. Even though Dumont casually mentioned the contest between different castes in the hierarchy, he was of the opinion that such changes were peripheral and did not really disturb the hierarchical essence of caste system. Dumont (1980) argued that there has been change in the society and not change of the society. According to him, the society as an overall framework has not changed.

Among the literature on caste in Keralam, Mohan (2015) examined the Dalit life in Keralam placing his focus on the Pulaya and Paraya castes who were converted to Christianity. It is possible to comprehend the striking differences between the lives of the low castes/communities and the high castes/communities from his study. It is viable to perceive from Mohan's account, the diffusion of the vices connected with the caste system among the Christians also on an equal footing with the Hindus. In this way, it could be interpreted that Mohan's study illustrates how the Christians are encompassed within the Hindu caste society. Pointing to the continuity of slavery attached to caste system, he stated that the abolition of slavery in 1855, which left the caste system intact made little practical difference to low castes. He sheds light at the fact that as long as caste as a system, which involves upper and lower castes persists, the conditions, which made particular communities slaves would continue. Mohan showed how the memories connected with slave experience shaped their selfhood and identity. Moreover, he uncovered the colonial influence in reconstructing the slave identity of an age-old slave caste. Mohan's description of the socio-religious reform movements among the low castes initiated by protestant missionaries and carried forward by low caste reformers themselves could be construed as a demonstration of the low caste efforts to get rid of their impurity in order to attain purity. The rise of a new moral language among the low castes and their efforts to acquire land ownership, education and familial and bodily reforms exposes their attempts to achieve a higher status in the modern society. Hence, Mohan depicts the continuation of the caste system.

Osella and Osella (2000) wrote about the attempts of social mobility among the Ezhava caste in Keralam. It is possible to say that by exposing the multiple and conflicting elements of mobility, they are showing the manner in which differently placed actors shaped and responded to modernity. They displayed the way Ezhava individuals, families and social groups utilized the mediation of macro trends in consumption, employment, migration, religion, marriage, personal friendships and politics to bring changes in family and community identity. It could

be inferred that their study exposes the efforts of the Ezhava caste to get rid of their Ezhavaness. Their denial of their caste identity becomes evident in the description of their efforts to move away from their own caste-identified occupations like toddy tapping and manual labour in the paddy fields. It is also evident in the account of their endeavours to distance themselves from less affluent *Ezhavanmar* and to associate themselves with the high castes. They aspired to get close to the Nayar caste and the Syrian Christians in terms of practice and avoid associations with the Pulaya caste. It is possible to infer that the Ezhava exertions towards social mobility, portrayed by Osella and Osella, reaffirms the very principles of purity and impurity, which the caste was expecting to dismantle. Their efforts to get rid of it are resulting in its continuation. Moreover, it can be deduced from the study of Osella and Osella that the Ezhava caste is trying to make use of the multiple opportunities brought before them by modernity to achieve economic and political power with the hope of achieving a high status in the modern society.

Uncovering the Namboodiri memories connected with their special kinship practices and Kerala's distinctive social and political history, Gallo (2017) explained the ways in which it shaped their contemporary kinship relations and influenced the formation of a middle class identity among them. Through a range of themes such as social reforms in the early 20th century, arranged and self-arranged marriages, endogamy and inter-caste marriages, and domestic space, architecture and social relations, Gallo exposed a complex set of processes through which *Namboodirimar* transformed from an aristocratic elite enjoying holy status to a more anonymous middle class of modern citizens. It is feasible to say that this 'fall' of the *Namboodirimar*, at the same time, exposes the social, economic and political changes that happened in Kerala with the coming of colonial and post-colonial modernity. It could be surmised that Gallo portrays how the *Namboodirimar* forged a modern status through radical kinship reforms that included among other things, younger sons marrying endogamously, registering a *sambandham* as marriage and bringing Nayar wives and children to live in the *Illam* (ancestral house of *Namboodirimar*).

Why did the *Namboodirimar* need a modern status? From what is deduced from Gallo, it could be said that they are part of the modern context of rising competitions between the different castes and communities to acquire economic and political power in the modern Kerala society. It could be said that the Namboodiri awareness that in the modern setting, religious rituals alone does not give them a superior position is making them strive with the others for economic and political power. Gallo showed how the burden of the Namboodiri past structured their present. *Namboodirimar* considered their kinship practices prior to the social reform movement, responsible for the shrinking of their population and their somewhat marginal position in

contemporary Keralam. It is possible to say that this makes them aspire for a new identity and modern status to suit the modern society.

Inequity elements within the Namboodiri caste is evident in the account of Gallo. This is patent in the description of the internal differences in the caste, in the difference between higher-status and lower-status *Namboodirimar*. Like in the case of the Ezhava caste where the affluent among them tried to distance themselves from the less affluent within the caste as shown by Osella and Osella (2000), the affluent among the Namboodiri caste kept a distance from the less affluent among them. This exposes the manner in which inequalities operated even among the high castes. Thus, it is possible to decipher that Gallo exposes the efforts of a high caste to define and restructure their identity as a promising middle class, in the modern socio-political and economic setting.

Jeffrey (1976) portrayed the interplay of economic, political, religious and caste factors in the decline of Nayar dominance. *Nayanmar* enjoyed social, economic and political might until around the mid-19th century. The growth of Christian missionary activities, administrative changes and reforms brought by certain kings and diwans of Travancore and the emergence of the cash economy widened the educational, occupational and political opportunities of low castes/communities who began to challenge the supremacy of the *Nayanmar*. It indicates the emergence of a class society. Jeffrey showed that the new openings benefited Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians more than the *Nayanmar* who were stuck in their peculiar social traditions and customs like the *Namboodirimar*. Competitions and conflicts between *Nayanmar* and other castes/communities in the social, economic and political realms went parallel to reform movements within the Nayar caste that ultimately led to the break-up of large matrilineal joint families. There were conflicts between the Nayar and Namboodiri castes also regarding the relationship between Namboodiri men and Nayar women, which indicates the ambiguity in the relation between the two castes. What is discerned from Jeffrey is the continuation of the caste system in the modern setting and the attempts and struggle of a high caste, the Nayar caste, to frame their identity to maintain purity and high status with the advent of a class society, where they have to compete with other castes/communities for economic and political power.

Exploring the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism by using the categories of time, space, architecture and the body, Visvanathan (1993) examined the ways in which Hindu, Christian and Syrian strands are woven together to form a rich cultural tapestry. It is very much possible to interpret her account as showing how Christianity existed within the framework of

the dominant regional culture of Hinduism. It could be said that uncovering the caste nature of Christianity in Keralam, she is showing how Christianity is encompassed within the Hindu society. Her account of the schisms and conflicts within the Christian community indicates the inequalities and disparities practiced within the community, which indirectly point at the account given by Mohan (2015) of the discriminations the converted low caste Christians faced from high castes and communities. Visvanathan's account of the Syrian Christian claims that they are the descendants of Brahmins converted by the apostle St. Thomas, clearly exposes the Syrian Christian attempts to acquire purity and high status in the Kerala society. From her accounts, it is obvious that they are trying to pose as the Christian *Namboodirimar*. Hence, her study could be read as an exposure of the extent to which Hindu caste principles have penetrated Christianity in Keralam.

Jeffrey (1976), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) gives a good hint of the emergence of a class society in Keralam based on political and economic power. The changed social, economic and political conditions brought about by education, secular occupations, migration, remittances, consumerism, etc. has paved the way for the rise of a society based on class and individualization. In this context, the social mobility projects of the different castes and communities apparently seem to be for raising the position of different persons and families belonging to different castes and communities in the modern Kerala society. Is it really possible for them to raise their social position? It is possible to detect the competitions and conflicts between the various castes and communities in Keralam and their attempts to restructure their identities to suit new social, economic and political conditions in the studies made by Jeffrey (1976), Visvanathan (1993), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017). Even though Jeffrey (1976), Visvanathan (1993) and Gallo (2017) do not state it explicitly, it is obvious from their accounts that this struggle for economic and political power and purity is not limited to the low castes/communities alone but extends also to the high castes/communities as well in slightly different and minor forms. The claims put forward by Syrian Christians regarding Brahmin blood and apostolic origins, shown by Visvanathan (1993) indicate their attempts to get rid of all the uncertainties connected with their conversion and the life before conversion and to establish a genesis based on purity and high status. Establishment of such purity claims is essential for their existence and acceptance in a Hindu dominated caste society.

The struggle to attain purity is obviously most pronounced among the low castes and communities like how it can be interpreted from the studies of Mohan (2015) and Osella and Osella (2000) regarding the slave castes and the Ezhava caste. It is deduced from their studies

that Hinduism was a religion of the high castes in Kerala. Many of the low castes like the Pulaya and Ezhava castes had their own religious worlds that were different from Hinduism. Sree Narayana Guru's attempt to incorporate the Ezhava caste into the Hindu religion by creating a parallel religious world to Hinduism reveals the multiple ways the low castes strived for purity. The struggle of the low castes to enter the Hindu temples and to become 'Hindus' were part of their efforts to move closer to the high castes. The religious rationalization efforts by the Christian missionaries and the reform leaders of the low castes also point at the mobility efforts of the low castes/communities. Therefore, the whole lifeworld of the Pulaya and Ezhava castes had to be transformed in order to achieve social mobility, which was possible only by getting rid of their Pulayaness and Ezhavaness. Hence, social mobility itself is based on the principles of purity and impurity.

No matter how much political and economic power one attains, there is some authority that status based on the notions of purity and pollution holds that no political or economic power can do away, thereby making (political and economic) power subordinate to status. It is governing the body and conduct of people, determining the value regime that governs people's lives, making them at some level, accept their own subordination. Hence, whatever political and economic developments come, those belonging to the different castes and communities cannot really get out of the web of purity and pollution. This makes the whole project of social mobility ambiguous. From the accounts of Jeffrey (1976), Visvanathan (1993), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017), it is inferred that more than the position in the hierarchy, what the different castes and communities relate to is the issue of purity and impurity because that is what characterize their identity. Social position is considered more as a scale to measure one's level of purity. The way people try to overcome the notions of purity and pollution shows the strength of the principle. However, no matter how much the low castes/communities strive to purify themselves, the high castes/communities continue to treat them as impure and low, as they assert that purity status is ascribed through birth and is not an achieved status. Hence, the whole attempt of social mobility underscores the fragility of the project of mobility as all attempts to purity is encompassed with the Hindu caste system.

Countering Dumont's (1980) argument that caste is a system of hierarchy based on inequality, Dirks (2001: 273) highlighted the colonial influence in shaping today's caste. The British employed mainly elite castes like the Brahmins to collect data for ethnographic surveys and censuses. In this way, caste became Brahminical and hierarchical. The Brahminical view became institutionalized and hence embedded in the society, when there could have been multiple other ways of categorization. Until then, the identity and social belonging of people

were in most cases deeply multidimensional and vague as comprehended from Jeffrey (1976) and Gallo (2017). They describe the complex relationship between Namboodiri men and Nayar women and the children born out of such relationships. The same applies to the relationship between Tamil Brahmin men and Nayar women and the children born out of it. Even though the children who were born out of such relationships were regarded as belonging to the Nayar caste, they were intimately and intrinsically connected to the Namboodiri and Tamil Brahmins castes.

Such facts were suspended and put aside by the new colonial method of categorization. Each person was given only one place in the caste system. In the Namboodiri-Nayar instance, their children were denied their Namboodiri relation and identity. Suddenly caste became a matter of choice, which became the basis for a new identity and reality. The differences and disparities within and among the different castes/communities as shown by Osella and Osella (2000) and Gallo (2017) with regard to the affluent and less affluent within castes were not taken into account. The multidimensionality, fluidity and ambiguities connected with social relationships gave way to certainties and rigidities. With the inclusion of caste category in the census reports and ethnographic survey of India by the British, caste became supreme and a single term capable of expressing, organizing and systematizing India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization. It made caste the central symbol of Indian society. When caste became the main classification for counting and categorizing people, the society and its classifications mostly became a question of purity and impurity, which became the dominating norm since colonial times. By highlighting the colonial influence in shaping the modern caste system, Dirks (2001) is actually showing the continuation of the caste system in modern times.

When Dirks (2001) highlighted the colonial influence in shaping the modern caste system and the continuation of the system in modern times, Srinivas (2009) and Gupta (2004 and 2005) wrote about the possibilities of social mobility in the caste system. According to Srinivas (2009), the caste system has been undergoing changes since pre-colonial times leading to the upward mobility of various low castes. He showed dominant castes forcefully taking over power and becoming kings thereby moving up to the hierarchy of Kshatriyas in pre-colonial times. According to him, post-colonial development of transport and communication, integration of regional economies to the national economy, building of new towns and cities, emergence of new occupations, introduction of the principle of equality of opportunity, popularization of democratic and libertarian ideas, etc. further brought massive changes in the caste system that allowed upward mobility in new forms. The post-colonial developments,

which Srinivas mentions are similar to the developments shown by Osella and Osella (2000) that were being used by the Ezhava caste to achieve social mobility.

Srinivas (2009) also wrote about the process of Sanskritization. Sanskritization is the process by which a low caste takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high caste. Economic betterment, acquisition of political power, education, leadership, and a desire to move up in the hierarchy, are all relevant factors in Sanskritization. According to Srinivas, each case of Sanskritization may show all or some of these factors mixed up in different measures. Sanskritization of a group usually has the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy. All these characteristics are evident in the social mobility mentioned by Osella and Osella (2000) regarding the Ezhava caste and Mohan (2015) regarding the Pulaya caste. However, it is possible to say that Jeffrey (1976), Visvanathan (1993) and Gallo (2017) also indicate such enthusiasms among the Syrian Christians and the Nayar and Namboodiri castes. Even though the Namboodiri and Nayar castes and the Syrian Christians are regarded as having high status, they are also active in social mobility projects. However, from the studies made by Jeffrey (1976), Visvanathan (1993), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) it can be deduced that even though, the high castes and communities are also part of the competitions for social mobility in the class society, their actions are aimed more at maintaining their purity and status than in achieving it. Their challenge is to achieve economic and political power, which is the basis of the class society. This exposes the ambiguity involved in the process of social mobility in Kerala. Moreover, the Sanskritization theory of Srinivas is also partly an affirmation of the existence of the principles of purity and impurity. What the process of Sanskritization depicts is the attempts for upward mobility of the different castes/communities.

In a similar manner, exhibiting the post-independent political and economic transformations in India, Gupta (2004 and 2005) asserted that the nature of caste has changed considerably in contemporary India to such an extent that it is possible even to say that the caste system of the past has collapsed. He stated that the establishment of democracy made all castes legally equal. This allowed castes that were once considered to be subaltern in character to break free of rural protocol to politically express their ambitions and to defy established symbolic and ritual systems. In his view, caste identities have evolved to a much higher level that it is now a question of self over others and not self in relation to others. Thus, no matter which caste is in question, its involvement in politics is primarily to stake a claim to jobs, educational opportunities, as well as to positions of power in government bodies in direct competition against other castes. However, in spite of demonstrating the divergent factors that brought

changes in the nature of post-independent caste system, Gupta stated that caste could not change intrinsically as long as it was fundamentally founded on identities that drew their sustenance from a rhetoric of natural differences that were imbued with notions of purity and impurity. In his view, to be able to go beyond caste identities was not something that either democratic politics or market economics could accomplish with ease. However, in his opinion, this is something that is possible and this is possible only through exogamy, urbanisation and its logic of anonymity.

Gupta is indicating the emergence of the new class society in India and the rise of individualization. These signs are prevalent in Keralam also. However, as I have already mentioned, attempts towards social mobility by the various castes are ultimately an effort towards purification. Better education, occupations, living conditions and so on are only scales to measure the level of purity and status they managed to achieve/maintain. It is possible to interpret Osella and Osella (2000) as showing the attempts of the Ezhava caste to make use of modern opportunities to discard the factors that tied them to pollution and low status. It could be inferred that this was the reason why they tried to move out of the paddy fields and their own caste occupation connected with coconut trees. This was also the reason why they kept a distance with the less affluent members of their own caste. Association with them and other low castes was a hindrance in getting rid of pollution and achieving purity. Similarly, it is possible to decipher from Mohan's (2015) account that the efforts of the Pulaya caste to acquire land ownership, education and familial and bodily reforms were primarily to get rid of their Pulayaness, which symbolized pollution. It is also viable to infer from Jeffrey (1976), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) that even the high castes and communities' effort towards modernization are to maintain/retain their purity and high status in the modern society. Are these social mobility projects helping any of the low castes/communities to attain purity and high status? It again raises the question of encompassment within the Hindu caste society. All attempts to rise up from pollution to purity is encompassed within the structures of the caste system. This points at Dumont's (1980) assertion that there has been change in the society and not change of the society; the society as an overall framework has not changed.

Consumption

There is a deep connection between the newly developed consumer culture in Keralam and social mobility. As consumption patterns play an important part in the transformations happening in the social composition and stratifications in Kuttanad, I am making a probe into some theories related with consumption that has relevance in my research. Douglas and Isherwood (2002) and Appadurai (1988b) have highlighted the social and political

characteristics of goods. Douglas and Isherwood stated that goods are neutral and their uses are social. According to them, goods can be used as fences or bridges. In their view, consumers are always making deliberate selections among co-consumers and the result of their selection is a community of a particular type. Thus, goods make and maintain social relationships. According to them, to be rich means to be well integrated in a rich community. To be poor is to be isolated. They pointed out that consumption is all about control. There is a comprehensive, fundamental set of human wants, which concerns control of humans and also escape from being controlled. According to them, ultimately, consumption is about power. Within the available time and space, the individual uses consumption to say something about himself, his family, his locality, etc. The kind of statements he makes are about the kind of universe he is in.

Thus, goods become the visible part of culture and are endowed with value by the agreement of fellow consumers. They come together to grade events, upholding old judgements or reversing them. Each person is a source of judgments and a subject of judgements; each individual is in the classification scheme whose discriminations he is helping to establish. The kind of world they create together is constructed from commodities that are chosen for their fitness to mark the events in an appropriately graded scale. According to Douglas and Isherwood, goods are arranged in hierarchies that can give play to the full range of discrimination of which the human mind is capable. Ultimately, their structures are anchored to human social purposes. Douglas and Isherwood wrote about how people allocate their expenditures in categories and then make subdivisions within these categories. Necessities are given first priority and then luxuries. However, today's luxuries would be tomorrow's necessities. When society is stratified, the luxuries of the common man might become the daily necessities of the upper classes. In this way, consumption evolves and plays a part in the change and in this evolution, social categories get continually redefined.

When Douglas and Isherwood (2002) exposed the social aspect of consumption/goods, Appadurai (1988b) revealed its political aspect. According to Appadurai, the meanings of things are inscribed in their forms, their uses and their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Even though from a theoretical point of view, human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view, it is the things in motion that illuminate their human and social context. According to him, the creation of value of a commodity is a politically mediated process. Consumption is subject to social control and political redefinition. In his view, demand, hence, consumption, is an aspect of the overall political economy of societies. Demand emerges as a function of a variety of social practices and classifications,

rather than a mysterious emanation of human needs, a mechanical response to social manipulation or the narrowing down of a universal and voracious desire for objects to whatever happens to be available. Appadurai asserted that demand is the economic expression of the political logic of consumption. In his view, demand is a socially regulated and generated impulse, not an artefact of individual whims and needs. Even in modern, capitalist societies, the media and the impulse to imitate are not the sole engines of consumer demand; demand can be manipulated by direct political appeals.

In their study, Osella and Osella (2000) traced the consumer practices and the politics behind such practices of low castes, especially the Ezhava caste and showed how they used it for attaining social mobility in the modern Kerala society. They showed how consumerism was utilized by the Ezhava caste to create social relationships with the high castes/communities and to distance themselves from low castes like the Pulaya caste and the less affluent within their own caste. What Osella and Osella are showing is how the Ezhava caste is using economic power through consumerism for social mobility and higher status. In other words, they are utilizing consumerism to display their economic power with the objective of achieving social mobility and a higher status. By exposing their economic power, they are trying to evade the high caste/community control over them and at the same time, raise their position and status in the hierarchy. From the study of Osella and Osella, it can be deduced that the consumption style of the low castes/communities are different from that of the high caste/communities and this in itself is enough to see the gap in the social status of the low and high castes. In a way, consumption styles mirror the social status of a person. Osella and Osella wrote about the stages of consumption from basic consumption goods to luxury consumption goods and consumption that helps to improve education, occupation, health, etc. These are all with the purpose of achieving not just immediate result but long-lasting effect for social mobility, making it a project that spans generations. Thus, much in line with Douglas and Isherwood (2002) and Appadurai (1988b), it is possible to see Osella and Osella shedding light at the social and political drive behind consumption patterns observed in Kerala.

This sheds light at the analysis of class made by Kocka (1980). In Kocka's observation, class has three dimensions – economic, social and political. The economic class is a multitude of families and individuals sharing an economic situation and latent interests. They acquire material wealth and are able to improve their material condition. Here, class interests are in contrast to interests of those belonging to other classes. The social class is a group of families and individuals who, in addition to belonging to an economic class, share a common social identity, that is, some degree of internal cohesion and mutual communication, common

experiences, fears and aspirations, common manifest interests, awareness or consciousness of their common characteristics as a class, loyalties and solidarity. Here, tensions develop between the members of the class and the members of other classes, and the distinction between one's own class and other classes is present in the peoples' experiences, thoughts, and language. The political class is a group of families and individuals who, in addition to belonging to an economic class and to a social class, form common organizations or/and act collectively as members of a class. Kocka calls them the 'class in action.' They consider themselves as a political force and regard their upward mobility as a political movement. Here conflicts develop between classes, and, perhaps between a class and the State.

Kocka stated that these classes are not a static entity but a process and are always in the course of becoming or disappearing. He stated that it would be wrong to suppose a causal unilinearity between the economic class, social class and the political class nor is there a clear chronological order from economic class to social class to political class. While common class loyalties in the social class may serve as a basis for collective class action in the political class, class conflicts in political class might strongly affect the evolution of loyalties and class-consciousness in social class. Likewise, both tensions and conflicts between the social class and the political class can influence the economic situation and class relations in the economic class. The processes of class formation are not automatic and never complete because there are always competing economic structures, affiliations, loyalties and battlefronts, which crisscross the class lines, build bridges across them, and departmentalize the classes internally, following non-class, e.g. occupational, ethnic, religious etc. lines. The clearer the class line emerges as a divide both in objective reality and in the minds of the people, in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres, relatively to the other lines of differentiation like regional background, religion, etc. the more one can say that class formation proceeds and vice-versa. The question is to what dimension are the different castes and communities in Kuttanad oriented and to what extent? The answer is very ambiguous in a society showing inclinations of individualization.

Beck (1992) wrote that in the course of individualization, the tendency is towards the emergence of individualized forms and conditions of existence, where people make themselves the center of their own planning and conduct of life. They insist on controlling their own money, time, living space and body. In a way, they choose their own identity. In other words, people demand the right to develop their own perspectives on life and to be able to act upon it.

According to Beck, individualization involved a process of detraditionalization. The attachment of people to a 'social class' becomes weaker. Status-based social settings and lifestyles typical

of a class culture now has much less influence on their actions. However, Beck stated that class differences and family connections are not really annulled in the course of individualization processes but they recede into the background. Processes of individualization deprive class distinctions of their social identity. Social groups lose their distinctive traits, both in terms of their self-understanding and in relation to other groups and hence, they lose their independent identities and the chance to become a formative political force. As a result of this development, the idea of social mobility in the sense of individual movement between actual status classes, which constituted a social and political theme of considerable importance for social identity formation pales into insignificance.

Beck shed light at the link between individualization and labour market. He stated that an educated person becomes the producer of his/her own labour situation and upward mobility. As soon as people enter the labour market, they experience mobility that makes them independent and removes them from traditional patterns and arrangements. However, he pointed out that shared backgrounds like similar education, experience and knowledge creates competitions. The growing pressure of competition leads to an individualization among equals. In this sense, inequalities are redefined and competition undermines the equality of equals without eliminating it. It causes the isolation of individuals within homogeneous social groups. In his view, education, mobility and competition are by no means independent of each other but supplement and reinforce each other. In his way, it could be stated that he showed that relations of inequality continue.

Beck pointed out that the process of individualization is accompanied by a high degree of institutionalization and standardization of forms of living. The individual is removed from traditional commitments and support relationships but exchanges them for new forms of control set by the constraints of existence in the labour market and as a consumer with the standardizations and controls they contain. The place of traditional ties and social forms are taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon education, social policies, regulations, the market and its economic cycles, product offers, consumption, fashions and so on, contrary to the image of individual control, which establishes itself in consciousness. It results in generically designed housing, furnishings, articles of daily use, as well as opinions, habits, attitudes and lifestyles launched and adopted through the mass media. In other words, individualization delivers people over to an external control and standardization that was unknown in the enclaves of familial and feudal subcultures.

Beck pointed out that as each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his/her own hands to make their own decisions on education, occupation, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, the biographies become self-reflexive and the individual will have to 'pay for' the consequences of their own decisions. Socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced. There emerges, paradoxically, a new proximity of individual and society. Social crises appear as individual crises, which are no longer perceived in terms of their rootedness in the social realm. The institutional conditions that determine individuals are no longer just events and conditions that happen to them, but consequences of the decisions they themselves have made. Hence, social problems are increasingly perceived in terms of psychological dispositions: as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses. The extent to which individualization has taken its hold over Kuttanad society needs to be analyzed.

Development

In *Seeing Like A State*, Scott (1998) explained systematically why States in the 20th century so often failed in their utopian, ambitious projects to engineer society or the natural environment to improve the human condition, leading to counterproductive if not disastrous outcomes. In his analysis, the States want only to simplify reality and fit it into their own administrative categories, inevitably discarding local knowledge that is often critical to managing the complexities of social life and the natural environment. Even though, Scott is writing about an entirely different terrain, his analysis is applicable in my context of study in Kuttanad.

Scott explicated the high-modernist ideology of the State that placed great confidence in scientific and technological progress, expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. In his opinion, high modernism is a particularly sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied in every field of human activity. This great faith in science and industry made the high modernists uncritical, unskeptical and thus unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production. The high modernists, he noted, could be capitalist entrepreneurs, powerful officials and heads of State. The progenitors of such plans regarded themselves as far smarter and more far-seeing than they really were and at the same time, regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than they really were (Scott 1998: 343).

Scott asserted that the primary mistake made by the high modernists is the disregard and suppression of local knowledge and local variation, which he argued, was the reason behind the practical failure of their schemes and plans. He wrote that a certain understanding of science, modernity and development has so successfully structured the dominant discourse that all other kinds of knowledge are regarded as backward, static traditions and as old wives' tales and superstitions. High modernism implied a truly radical break with history and tradition, which according to him, is deeply authoritarian. The neglect of local knowledge made the planners and the government formulate plans that were distant from the actual realities where the plans were implemented. This resulted in policies and schemes that did not contain the real needs, wants and desires of the people for whose well-being the plans were made. Scott maintained that officials of the modern State were one step – and often several steps – removed from the society they were charged with governing. Even though, Scott's study is a criticism of the State and the schemes the State imposes, to make societies 'legible' for the State but which are not necessarily good for the people and the environment, I link Scott's analysis more to the interventions of the market economy in the various development initiatives and projects found in Kuttanad/Keralam. However, almost all these capitalist interventions are, of course, with the knowledge and support of the State, which makes it impossible to sideline the role played by the State.

In his study of the interaction between technology and socio-cultural contexts, Wilhite (2008) exposed the change in the architectural styles in Keralam that suited the spread of air-conditioners. He illustrated the slow penetration of the capitalist market economy into local contexts with the support of the government and how it gained control of the construction industry and the consumer industry in the State. He showed how this led to the disappearance of traditional builders whose buildings always blended with the landscape and the ecology. Their place was taken over by contractors, often backed by capitalist enterprises, who began to construct buildings that were completely unsuited to the environment and climate in Keralam, which necessitated the purchase of consumption goods like air conditioners. Similarly, Nilayangod (2007) have written about the changes in the architectural styles of houses in the Kuttanad region. She illustrated the demolition of traditional houses and the values connected with it to give way to modern architectural styles that did not fit the landscapes in the region. What is understood from her writing is the change brought by modernity in the attitudes of the people, which is reflected in the way they build and renovate their houses.

Modern values are greatly influencing people's attitude towards traditional structures and emblems and this is significant in social mobility contexts. When we relate it to the various

studies on social mobility in Keralam, like Osella and Osella (2000), it can be seen that the various low castes/communities in their urge for modernity and mobility laid hands on everything that pulled them out of the old impure structures and hence became easy preys of capitalist developments. Wilhite (2008) and Nilayangode (2007) shed light at the market driven modern developments in Keralam that became symbols of modernity, which shaped new social values and increased the social demand and popularity of decontextualized engineering trends. This gave rise to a deep-seated cultural phenomenon of developments that did not fit the environment or take the environment into account.

In his study about modern developments in Kuttanad, Biminith (2008) demonstrated the faulty ways of road construction in the region, which was increasing the intensity of floods. The roads were built without proper study of the geography of the region and hence were causing adverse environmental impacts. It is apprehended from the study made by Biminith that the social, economic and political demands for road are increasing with the changing lifestyles and prospects brought by modernity. However, while satisfying the development needs of the people, which includes their needs for social mobility, the environment is neglected resulting in catastrophes like floods.

Socially and culturally constructed modernist development trends that is visible in the construction of houses and roads in Kuttanad covers the entire engineering and construction industry in the State and is adversely affecting the environment as shown by Paithalen (2005) and Abraham (2015). Paithalen's and Abraham's account of the disappearance of the wetlands in Keralam by filling it up with the earth brought from the hilly regions of the State for new constructions and developments exposes the wideness of the trend. It exposes the expansion of private corporate interests for building consumer centers and business and commercial hubs with State support and cushioned by people's desire for social mobility. Hence, when we read Paithalen (2005), Nilayangode (2007), Biminith (2008), Wilhite (2008) and Abraham (2015) together with Jeffrey (1976), Visvanathan (1993), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) in the light of Scott's (1998) theory, it can be understood that they implicitly point at the entanglement of development and social mobility projects. However, it can be seen that in the whole process, local knowledge and the environment are neglected and disregarded.

The political, economic and social factors at play exposes the other dimensions of infrastructures than as mere physical structures as expounded by Pfaffenberger (1988) and Larkin (2013). Pfaffenberger (1988: 236-239) portrayed the social choices and social relations that figure in technological system. He redefined technology as a total social phenomenon in

the sense used by Mauss (2002), that is, it is simultaneously material, social, political and symbolic. Pfaffenberger argued that however inhuman our technology might seem, it is a product of human choices and social processes. To construct a technology is not merely to deploy materials and techniques; it is also to construct social and economic alliances, to invent new legal principles for social relations, and to provide powerful new vehicles for culturally provided myths. To create a new technology is to create not only a new artefact, but also a new world of social relations and myths. Hence, choices exist in the process of technological deployment and consequent societal transformation. He argued that technology was not an independent, non-social variable that had an 'impact' on society or culture. On the contrary, any technology was a set of social behaviours and a system of meanings. Similarly, Larkin (2013) pointed out that infrastructures reveal forms of political rationality that underlie technological projects and which give rise to, he quotes Foucault (2010: 70), 'an apparatus of governmentality'. Hence, in his view, infrastructures existed as forms separate from their purely technical functioning.

The decontextualized and exaggerated development undertakings, plans and constructions in Kuttanad brings attention to the manner in which people respond to developments as shown by Tsing (1993). In her study of the Meratus Dayaks, a marginal and marginalized group in the rainforest of South Kalimantan in Indonesia, Tsing exposed how Meratus Dayaks worked to define and redefine their situation on the periphery of State power. The Meratus are shown as caught in a set of relationships with the outside world in which they seem to be disadvantaged, yet, by reinterpreting the various aspects of the wider world presented to them, they incorporate these into their image of order and thus retain a sense of themselves as a people. In this way, Tsing showed the ways in which people actively engaged their marginality by reinterpreting and embellishing their exclusion. By describing the urban fantasies of self and Other, Tsing challenged the wider conceptions of the Other by highlighting the contradictions in the notions of citizenship, locality, marginality and self-representation. In the Kuttanad context, the marginality and exclusion Tsing talks about is translated into the exclusion and marginality of the low caste/communities by the high castes/communities in the social hierarchy and their efforts to define and redefine their situation on the peripheries of social landscape utilizing the opportunities presented to them by market driven modern developments. The manner of shaping the physical landscapes by way of roads, buildings, houses, etc. shown by Paithalen (2005), Nilayangode (2007), Biminith (2008), Wilhite (2008) and Abraham (2015) disclosures the way the different castes/communities define and redefine their conditions to attain purity, mobility and status.

The religious movement of the Pulaya caste shown by Mohan (2015) could be construed as the Pulaya effort to reinterpret their marginality and exclusion in line with the thought put forward by Tsing (1993). Christianity was part of the modern developed world for the slave caste. They utilized modernity and development in a more radical way than how Tsing presents, to redefine their identity. Utilizing the doctrines of Christianity introduced to them by the protestant missionaries, Poykayil Yohannan's Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha liberated the slave castes from the peripheries of sin (in Christianity) and slavery (in the caste system) and placed themselves in the centre of Christianity. Yohannan's consideration of himself as a prophet illustrates this. Later, by discarding the Bible and making the movement into a non-Christian one, they placed themselves in the center of the movement. These changes were instrumental in the self-conception of the Pulaya caste. Hence, much in line with Tsing, it is possible to decipher Mohan's account as exposing the manner in which the Pulaya caste worked to redefine their situation on the peripheries of the caste system to carve out a new identity.

Nandy (2011) discussed about the tendency among the 'moderns' to set a binary opposition between tradition and modernity. According to him, in a society that has not experienced a complete hegemony of the modern, where modernity is still a minority consciousness, the presumed community of the moderns not merely ensures a degree of psychological security for them, but also underwrites their role as vanguards and pace-setters for the rest of the society. They feel they are perpetually carrying the brown man's burden to improve or brush up the personalities of the underprivileged, and bring them into the modern world that they, the vanguards and the pace-setters, inhabit. Nandy noted that such projects pay handsome dividends in the present global order and there has grown a vested interest in redefining entire communities as poor and exploited, as if such communities did not have any identity. This was as though they were without any culture worth the name and without any knowledge that might give their ideas and categories autonomous cognitive status even in their own battle against poverty and exploitation. There have been criticisms of modernity but such criticisms, when they come from within traditions, are not valued; they are seen as dangerous. Traditions are only allowed to establish their compatibility with modernity as part of a rather pathetic plea to be allowed to survive. Nandy asserted that it is the neglect of the rich 'traditional' that is making the 'southern' social knowledge sterile and hence asserted that the so-called underprivileged, poor and oppressed are quite capable of speaking for themselves. Hence, according to him, it is important to listen to the 'other possible worlds of knowledge'. In the context of Kerala, it is possible to say that Jeffrey (1976), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) are indicating the emergence of modernity from the traditional. It could be stated that they are pointing to the fact that modernity is not a minority consciousness and that the so-called

underprivileged, poor and oppressed have spoken for themselves from long time ago and have forcefully and powerfully shaped their modernity by themselves. It can be seen that the low caste/communities redefined and are still redefining their identity by themselves. They spearheaded their own revolution. However, to what extent and form such revolutions endure remains ambiguous.

Analyzing the emergent forms of post-colonial capitalism in India under conditions of electoral democracy, Chatterjee (2007) wrote about the position of peasantry in India. He stated that the advance of capitalist industrial growth in India would not break down peasant communities but would preserve them under completely altered conditions. According to him, with the continuing rapid growth of the Indian economy, the hegemonic hold of corporate capital is likely to continue. As a result, more and more primary producers will lose their means of production but most of them are unlikely to be absorbed in the new growth sectors of the economy. But Chatterjee pointed out that the changed political conditions of electoral democracy in India makes it unacceptable and illegitimate for the government to leave these marginalized population without means of labour to simply fend for themselves. Hence, he stated that a whole series of governmental policies are devised to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation of the corporate sector. However, he pointed out that even though the peasant community has the chance to claim and negotiate benefits from the State using the mechanisms of democratic politics, their ability to deal with the world of capital is still inadequate. At the same time, peasant production and livelihood in India is fully integrated into the market economy. Hence, in Chatterjee's opinion, peasant society would survive in India in the 21st century, but only by accommodating a substantial non-agricultural component within the village, reflecting a looming threat that small peasant agriculture will, sooner or later, have to succumb to the larger forces of capital. Hence, Chatterjee shows a parallel process of primitive accumulation and a process of meeting the basic needs of livelihood of the peasants by the government.

The question is to what extent does the Government in Kerala satisfy the needs of the people in the State? This sheds light at the Kerala Model of Development. The scholarly interest in Kerala as a 'model' was generated by a study on Kerala's path to development conducted by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram in 1975 under the leadership of K.N. Raj. The study pointed out that Kerala's people had achieved a relatively high degree of human development and quality of life despite low per capita income and consumption expenditures. They stated that this was a result of a special pattern of development pursued in Kerala, in which education played a significant role. Kerala's experience was thus held up as

a 'model' for the developing world, and in due course, the so called 'Kerala model' became part of the global development discourse. However, opinions on the Kerala Model of Development (KMD) differ significantly.

A number of scholars admire KMD as it has been able to achieve exceptional social development in areas such as health, education and demographic transition despite low growth in economic development and low per capita income. Appreciating KMD, Franke and Chasin (1994) stated that even though, predictably, Kerala has low per capita income as measured by official statistics, with regard to four social development indicators, that is, adult literacy, life expectancy, infant mortality, and birth rates, it is not only far ahead of India and every other Indian state (including India's richest state, the Punjab), but it also stands out among low income countries of the world and is even on a par with some middle income European countries. Highlighting the international context of the KMD, Patnaik (1995) asserted that this model provides a contrast to the traditional view, which sees development as a sequel to growth and which postulates, in other words, that economies should give the highest priority to growth of per capita output; and if growth occurs then human development would follow. The Kerala model, by contrast, shows that the elimination, or at any rate the alleviation, of the miserable conditions of life which the bulk of the population in the third world faces, does not have to await that distant day when growth has taken place to a sufficient extent for its 'trickledown effect' to make an impact upon the people. Emphasizing the performance of poverty eradication programmes of the Kerala Government like the Kudumbashree project, Pat (2005) pointed out that such programmes at the village level have enhanced the participation of women in decision-making process and poverty eradication. He stated that Kudumbashree with its stress on the empowerment, participation and leadership of women could make a qualitative difference to the life of the people. Likewise, Sen (1992), Sen (1994) and Zachariah et.al (1994), among many others underscored the efficiency of the KMD bringing attention to low fertility rates, literacy rates, etc.

Several others have criticized the KMD with regard to decline in agriculture (Tharamangalam 1984, Kannan and Pushpangathan 1988, Kurian 1994 and Jeromi 2003), industrial stagnation (Subramanian 1990 and George 1994), the State's handling of public sector enterprises (Pillai 1990), social and economic developments (Saradmoni 1994, George 1994, Tharamangalam 1998, Rammohan 2000, Pat 2005), alienation of certain marginalized sections of the population (Kurien 1995, Bijoy 1999, Prakash 2002 and Raman 2002), and so on. With regard to decline in agriculture, Kannan and Pushpangathan (1988) attributed it to ill-conceived development of critical factors such as water management and land development, which has been exacerbated

by increasing environmental degradation. Jeromi (2003) highlighted Kerala's agricultural problems like high cost of cultivation (especially due to labour shortage and high wages), low productivity, high land cost, concentration on commercial crops, decrease in the size of farm holdings and fall in prices of agricultural products.

Kurian (1994) noted that decline in agriculture was accompanied by a fall in the absolute number of independent cultivators and this resulted in a significant fall in employment in agriculture. He pointed out that agriculture is neither a subsistence activity nor a viable economic enterprise in Kerala except for a limited number of plantation crops, notably rubber. The phenomenal rise in land prices has little to do with the value of land for agricultural use; land is real-estate, needed for residential homes and as an indicator of social status; it is also generally seen to be the safest and best investment given the still volatile nature of the stock market. He stated that the radical changes in Kerala's agrarian economy have also led to transformations in the nature of agricultural activities, employment, and lifestyles. The average cultivator in Kerala is now a gentleman farmer who is not engaged personally in most agricultural activities. So, a substantial number of agriculturists have non-agricultural sources of income, mainly remittances from abroad or employment in Kerala's highly bloated service sector. The coexistence of labour shortages with high unemployment is also due to the perception that agricultural jobs are not economically worthwhile. More importantly, he noted that low-status and physically irksome jobs are no longer culturally desirable options in the State.

Industrial stagnation is a central factor for the criticisms raised against the KMD. George (1994) pointed out that as India enters a new era of accelerated industrialization in the 1990s it seems that Kerala is slipping further behind the nation as a whole and in particular behind such industrially dynamic neighbouring States like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Pillai (1990) criticized the manner in which the Kerala Government handled public sector enterprises. He showed that in 1989-90 there were eighty public enterprises, excluding the State Electricity Board and Transport Corporation, accounting for 9.7% of the total of 823 enterprises in all of India and with 6.7% of total investment. However, of the eighty, only thirty-two units made a profit, a total of Rs.370 million. The losses of the other forty-eight units amounted to Rs 990 million, resulting in a net loss of Rs 620 million to the State. Furthermore, sixty-five units had carried forward losses of Rs 6,530 million and 37 enterprises had negative worth. According to him, the most serious issue here is probably not the losses per se but the lack of accountability.

Keralam is criticized to be unable to make the recurring expenditure needed to sustain its social achievements. George (1994) demonstrated the fiscal unsustainability of the Kerala model by clearly enunciating the systemic nature of fiscal problems of Keralam during the sixteen years from 1974-90. He showed that Kerala's problem is that it does not and cannot generate enough revenue to finance and maintain its social development, with the result that the State faces progressively worsening deficits. He stated that since most of the available funds for social development are spent on salaries, very little is left for current expenses or for modernizing facilities. Kerala's social security system faces severe strain due to the increasing numbers of unemployed and the needs of pensioners whose concerns have not been addressed properly. Erosion of the State's much-admired public distribution system is also likely to have serious consequences in Keralam in the future, since Malayalees are now more dependent on food imports than at any time in the past. According to George, the paradoxical phenomenon of rapid social development unaccompanied by corresponding gains in economic growth has been exhausting itself in Keralam. George pointed out that the government has been in fiscal crisis and the deficits are largely in the revenue account, which finances current consumption. The government has been attempting to finance these deficits by using capital receipts and public account and that has severely restricted the government's ability to make capital expenditures. The revenue expenditures are inherently liable to increase over the years not only because of inflation but also because of second generation requirements of social development. For example, health care expenditures and pension payments have been going up as life expectancy has risen dramatically. Kerala government's ability to expand its resources is severely constrained by a variety of factors including stagnation in the tax base and control of taxation policy by the central government. The State government has no control over the substantial remittances of the non-resident Keralites.

According to Pat (2005), though Keralam now enjoys a high rate of economic growth and remittances continue to boost consumption, going by a number of socio-economic indicators such as farm production, unemployment, incidence of lifestyle diseases and suicides, the State is no 'god's own country'. Saradamoni (1994) stated that every forward or progressive step Kerala has taken has thrown up problems before the State and no serious attempt has been made to understand them in their totality. Education and educated unemployed, land reform legislation which did not include production, productivity or employment in its agenda, political awareness and individual or group rights without the essential sense of responsibility both at individual and collective level are just a few examples in this context.

Backwardness and alienation of certain marginalized sections of the population have been highlighted by scholars as a serious deficiency of the Kerala Model. Kurien (1995) pointed out that the 'central tendency' of the KMD largely deprived the outlier population like fishing community where the indicators of the quality of life pose no paradox of the kind noticed when considering the State as a whole: instead, one is confronted with the 'normal' relationship of low incomes with the associated poor quality of life. The progress and status of socio-economic minorities in Kerala seem to be far behind when compared with other social groups in society. He noted that the Adivasi (tribal) land alienation and their demand for self-rule are the most pressing and unresolved issues in contemporary Kerala. Bijoy (1999), Prakash (2002) and Raman (2002) also criticized the tendency of alienation of the tribal people in Kerala.

The accounts of these scholars expose the fact that the much-acclaimed Kerala Model of Development has its defects and drawbacks. Zachariah, Mathew and Rajan (2000), Zachariah et al. (2001), Kannan and Hari (2002), Pushpangadan (2003) and Zachariah and Rajan (2009 and 2012) have underscored the important role played by migration and remittances in the developments in Kerala. Zachariah et al. (2001) argued that migration, which is one of the positive outcomes of the Kerala Model of Development, must have contributed more to poverty alleviation than any other factor including agrarian reforms, trade union activities and social welfare legislation. Zachariah and Rajan (2012) stated that the total remittance of the Keralites was estimated to be approximately Rs.50, 000 crores in 2011 compared with Rs. 43,228 crores in 2008. They showed that remittance was Rs.63, 315 per household in 2011 compared with Rs. 57,227 in 2008. They showed that the result of this fund flow resulted in the development of the service sector, construction industry and increase in consumerism in the State. Hence, compared to many other States in India, Kerala is a remittance economy and this has a vital role in the economic development observed in the State. This would definitely play an important part in all other spheres of development observed in the State.

Even though various criticisms have been raised against the worth of Kerala Model of Development and there certainly are downsides, the political movements, socio-economic reform movements and the welfare measures in the State have been considerably better than in many other States in India, which makes the condition in Kerala in a way closer to what Chatterjee (2007) wrote. Even if, Chatterjee was writing about the condition of India in general, his viewpoints are more suitable to Kerala than to the other States. However, apart from the remittances, the income of the State government is very limited. There is more consumption than production. The tax paid in the State is also very low as in the rest of the country. So the question is how much can the State become a welfare State? How much quality services can

the government provide as Chatterjee claims? The quality and standard of government health care and education, for example, are seen to be very low in Kerala, which is a reason why people prefer private hospitals and schools in the State, in spite of the high cost rates. It is also understood from the studies conducted in Kerala that the distribution of economic wealth is uneven in the State leading to economic and social inequalities.

Nandy (2002) argued that development may have removed poverty in many societies, but it has done so by expanding the proportion of the destitute. While writing about the cultural-psychological constructions of poverty and how they enter public awareness, Nandy showed that development, poverty and destitution are closely connected. He stated that poverty is not destitution. By collating or collapsing these two terms, apologists of development have redefined all low-consuming, environment-friendly lifestyles as poor and, thus, degrading and unfit for survival in the contemporary world. Like Siva (1988), Nandy also emphasized that those regarded as poor, may not always be so. He noted that modern economics equates wealth creation with the conversion of national resources into cash. He stated that poverty has always been there but destitution has become more pronounced only recently given the assault on traditional communities and their life-support system.

Nandy pointed out that the differences that traditionally existed between lifestyles of the rich and the poor are disappearing. That distinction partly protected the poor from destitution and loss of dignity. In much of the world now, larger and larger proportions of the poor have everything the rich have, only they have its fourth-rate, down-market versions. The difference between the rich and the poor is becoming less cultural and more economic. The culture of poverty no longer protects the poor. And increasingly a sizeable section of the world's poor are becoming destitute. According to him, destitution is directly attributable to processes of development. Destitution has been increasing among many traditionally poor communities over the last hundred years, partly as a direct result of urbanization and development. This is because they find themselves unable to cope with the demands of an impersonal market or the culture of a modern political economy. Hence, in the context of Kerala, it might seem that the development has removed poverty but the reality is ambiguous.

The effect of capitalist development, its expansion and consequences are well exposed by Harvey (2003). Keeping the dialectical relationship between the politics of state and empire on the one hand and the molecular movements of capital accumulation in space and time on the other, Harvey showed how capital circulated in space and time to create its own distinctive historical geography. He asserted that there is a chronic tendency within capitalism, to produce

crises of over-accumulation. Such crises implicate surpluses of capital and surpluses of labour power (rising unemployment) side by side, without there apparently being any means to bring them together profitably to accomplish socially useful tasks. In such crises, geographical expansion and spatial reorganization are possibilities found by the capitalists to absorb the capital surpluses. Hence, capitalist production, exchange, distribution and consumption are in a state of perpetual motion as capitalists search for superior locations. The trend towards 'globalization' is inherent in this.

The second possibility to absorb the capital surpluses is spatial reorganization. He stated that any social formation or territory that is brought into the logic of capitalist development must undergo wide-ranging structural, institutional, and legal changes. Fluid movement over space could be achieved only by geographical transformation and relocation of capital activity, which involves fixing certain physical infrastructures in space. Railways, roads, airports, port facilities, cable networks, fibre-optic systems, electricity grids, water and sewage systems, pipelines, etc., constitute 'fixed capital embedded in the land'. Such physical infrastructures absorb a lot of capital, the recovery of which depends upon their use. This is a crucial point where the territorial and capitalist logics of power intersect. According to Harvey, the State is not innocent nor is it necessarily passive in relation to these actions and processes. Once it recognizes the importance of fostering and capturing regional dynamics as a source of its own power, it seeks to influence those dynamics by its policies and actions. The State uses its powers to orchestrate regional differentiation and dynamics not only through its command over infrastructural investments but also through its own imposition of planning laws and administrative apparatuses. He noted that an attractive business climate is likely to be a magnet for capital flow, and so States go out of their way to augment their own powers by setting up havens for capital investment.

According to Harvey, the neo-liberal State typically seek to enclose the commons, privatize, and build a framework of open commodity and capital markets. It maintains labour discipline and foster 'a good business climate'. In due course, the regions thus formed, come to play a crucial role in how the body politic of the State as a whole positions itself. Regionality crystallizes according to its own logic out of the molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time. According to Harvey, continuation of neo-liberal politics at the economic level entails escalation of accumulation, which will lead to dispossession. He pointed out that privatization (of social housing, telecommunications, transportation, water, etc.) has, in recent years, opened up vast fields for over-accumulated capital to seize upon. In his view, accumulation by dispossession is the necessary cost of making a successful breakthrough into

capitalist development with the strong backing of State powers. The motivations can be internally driven or externally imposed. In most cases, some combination of internal motivation and external pressure lies behind such transformations. And even when the motivation appears predominantly internal, the external conditions matter. Harvey emphasized the environmental consequences of capitalist developments. He stated that in its endless accumulation of capital and the never-ending search for profit, capitalism perpetually seeks to create a geographical landscape to facilitate its activities at one point in time only to have to destroy it and build a wholly different landscape at a later point in time to accommodate its perpetual thirst for endless capital accumulation. Thus, he argued that the history of creative destruction is written into the landscape of the historical geography of capital accumulation.

In their study of the changes in the land use pattern in Kuttanad, Roopa and Vijayan (2017) showed transformation of prime agricultural lands in the region in the past 46 years due to illegal settlements, urbanizing trends and so on. They exposed reduction in the area under wetlands and in the spatial extent of the Vembanad Lake. They noted 5% depletion in the area of the Vembanad Lake in Kuttanad from 1967-2001 and 2% decline from 2001-14. Similarly, Swaminathan (2007) and Jayan and Sathyanathan (2010) also disclosed the changes made in the physical landscapes of Kuttanad by the tourism industry and the real-estate industry. The studies of Paithalen (2005), Nilayangode (2007), Biminith (2008), Wilhite (2008), Jayanth and Sathyanathan (2010), Abraham (2015) and Roopa and Vijayan (2017) portray the changes made in the physical landscapes of Kuttanad/Keralam over the last few years in a way that is very similar to the analysis made by Harvey (2003) regarding geographical expansion and spatial reorganization to absorb capital surpluses. It illustrates the spread of capitalism in local contexts getting hold of local people's imaginations and dreams.

At the same time, relating the above-mentioned studies with the studies made by Jeffrey (1976), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) exposes the fact that the geographical changes happening in Kuttanad is not just related to capitalist expansion but is also deeply linked to the question of caste and social mobility. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that it has just as much to do with caste system as with capitalism. This could be the reason why there are not many capitalistic developments happening in Kuttanad apart from some roads, commercial buildings and constructions related with the tourism industry. More than profit, it is the question of caste that predominates the minds of the people. The changes made to the physical landscapes are more to escape from the old structures of pollution. The filling up of paddy fields shown by Paithalen (2005), Swaminathan (2007), Jayanth and Sathyanathan (2010), Abraham (2015) and Roopa and Vijayan (2017) are therefore to some extent to escape

the pollution related with Pulayaness and low status. In other words, the changes in the physical landscapes are made more to save themselves from the threat of downward mobility. However, in the whole process of development, the environment is seen getting neglected resulting in environmental imbalances and problems. This brings the question of environment to the forefront.

Environment

Giddens (2009) asserted that climate change is real and caused by the actions of humanity and is likely to have catastrophic consequences if action is not taken quickly. He noted that even though most of the public accept that global warming is a major threat; yet only a few are willing to alter their lives in any significant way. According to him, politics and society can and should be instituted in order to get us all out of this mess of climate change. The answer, in his view, lies in innovation, not just in terms of science and technology but in terms of politics, from grassroots - community levels to international organizations. Criticizing modernity, Giddens (1996) asserted that we are not yet living in a post-modern society, but rather we are experiencing the radical consequences of modernity. In his view, the distinctive characteristics of the major social institutions in the closing years of the twentieth century suggest that, rather than entering into a period of post-modernity, we are moving into a period of 'high modernity' in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than before. A post-modern social universe may eventually come into being, but this as yet lies on the other side of the forms of social and cultural organizations that currently dominate world history. According to him, modernity is a double-edged phenomenon. The development of modern social institutions has created greater opportunities for human beings to enjoy a secure and rewarding existence than in any type of pre-modern system. However, modernity also has a somber side such as the frequently degrading nature of modern industrial work, the growth of totalitarianism, the alarming development of military power and weaponry and the threat of environmental destruction.

Chakrabarty (2009) pointed out that when we look at the planetary and human species history, which is far superior and deeper, globalization is only a recent phenomenon. Hence, he asserted that the planetary and human existence must be placed above in importance and a passing phase such as globalization must not be allowed to destroy human species and the planet. He pointed out that what was important was the knowledge that humans as a species was dependent on other species for its own existence and was a part of the general history of life. Chakrabarty pointed out that it was unlikely that global politics would solve global warming. He noted that we have all stumbled into this Anthropocene and there was no point in making a distinction

between the capitalist and socialist societies as to who was responsible. What is needed is to find a way out. In her study of Kalimantan in Indonesia, Tsing (2005: 211) also brought a similar inference. She asked, 'how do we convince people that life on earth is worth saving?' According to her, this is a political question as well as an environmental one. She asserted that it required a politics of working across differences in which the goal was not to make differences disappear but to make it part of the political programme.

Heidegger (1977), Carson (1962) and Lovelock (2000) also emphasized the need to surpass differences and disputes to a level where life on earth is valued and revered, to make life on this planet sustainable. By asserting that technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology and that the essence of technology is by no means anything technological, Heidegger (1977) pointed out that the problem is not so much the existence of technology or the forms it takes, but rather our orientation to technology. He pointed out that we tend to think of technology as a means to get things done. According to him, this definition misses the actual essence of technology and tends to make us think that by making the technology better, we will master technology and solve the problems that accompany it. He pointed out that technology transforms our orientation to the world. Technology's instrumental orientation to the world transforms the world into 'standing-reserve', a source of raw materials. Heidegger called this orientation or attitude, 'enframing'. It is the human impulse to put the world 'into boxes' within categories of understanding or sets of classifications. This form of enframing stems from the human drive for a 'precise' and 'scientific' knowledge of the world in order to obtain control of the world. This is similar to what Ingold (2000) wrote about the triumph of technology over cosmology, which is resulting in humanity considering the world as an object of transformation. In the view of Heidegger, our orientation towards technology, which is the essence of technology, must change.

Heidegger pointed out that because enframing does not utterly change humanity's connection to the world, there is room, even within enframing, for a different orientation to the world. Hence, 'enframing' or the orientation or the essence contains two possibilities: It is a danger that sets man on a destructive and self-destructive course. At the same time, it is a 'saving power' and opportunity. Hence, within the 'supreme danger' of humanity's enframing orientation to the world lies the potential of a rescue from that very danger. Here, he stated, we have a choice and that we can choose. Once we 'open ourselves' to this essence of technology, which is our own orientation to the world, we find an opportunity to establish a free relationship to technology. Against an orientation that investigates all aspects of the world and assumes that the world can be controlled through measurement and categorization, Heidegger upheld an

alternative orientation or dimension of 'enframing', that is, artistic or poetic orientation. By doing so, we can guard against the dangers of enframing, and enter into a 'free' - constantly critical, constantly questioning - relationship with the technology that is constantly making new incursions into our lives.

Carson's (1962) exposure of the harmful effects that chemicals like pesticides, weed killers, etc., which were created to make life easier for man have on the environment is relevant. She described how indiscriminate use of pesticides destroyed ecosystems and failed even to permanently kill the pests. She clearly described how poisons spread through the environment, were absorbed into the body, and disrupted natural processes. She systematically went through the effects of pesticides on soil, water, birds, and plants, offering case after case in support of her thesis. Through her writing, Carson called humans to act responsibly, carefully, and as stewards of the living earth. She indicated a needed change in how democracies and liberal societies operated so that individuals and groups could question what their governments allowed others to put into the environment. Far from calling for sweeping changes in government policy, Carson believed the government was part of the problem. She identified human hubris and financial self-interest as the crux of the problem and asked if we could master ourselves and our appetites to live as though we humans are an equal part of the earth's systems and not the master of them.

Lovelock (2000) was optimistic in his analysis that humans would pull their collective fingers out and stop damaging the planet when he put forward his Gaia theory. He wrote about the importance of taking care of the planet Earth together in order to sustain life on this planet. The idea that the entire surface of the Earth including life is a self-regulating entity is what Lovelock meant by 'Gaia', the Greek word for 'Mother Earth'. In other words, according to him, Gaia or Earth is a self-sustaining, self-regulating system with in-built feedback loops, which hold it more or less steady and capable of supporting life. The planet has checks and balances in place, which bring Earth into equilibrium, even though many factors have changed over time. Lovelock argued that the world on which we live, acts as a huge living organism that regulates its own temperature and tempers its own 'body' chemistry so as to be habitable to life. In turn, the life, which inhabits the 'biosphere' helps to carry out these processes, which also means, that we must not block the life that inhabits the biosphere to carry out the processes that help sustain life. Through this, he was urging humanity to lead a sustainable life.

There are a number of studies done in Kuttanad and Keralam emphasizing the need for and importance of sustainable developments with concern for the environment in the region.

Padmakumar (2013) emphasized the importance of conserving biodiversity and developing integrated farming combining rice and fish in the wetlands of Kuttanad. He pointed out that rice-fish farming model was developed and popular among the farmers in Kuttanad in the past. He emphasized the need to bring that model back as an alternative to monocropping of rice, as rice and fish are staples in the diet of the people. He noted that judicious integration of rice and fish has been observed to enhance average income of farmers by 40% with significant savings on rice production costs rendering rice farming more organic, attractive and remunerative. He stressed the need for making the wetlands of Kuttanad a natural habitat for wildlife by increasing plant diversity and by mimicking the native ecosystems. He highlighted the fact that traditional paddy cultivation patterns adopted in Kuttanad in the past had profound respect for the natural functions of wetlands and that their land uses rarely disrupted the ecology. He pointed out that over the centuries, the farmers in Kuttanad have evolved varieties and strategies for rice cultivation in consonance with the rich biodiversity of plants and animals and the rigid environmental conditions in Kuttanad. He pointed out the necessity to safeguard and support ecologically viable farming practices. He stressed the importance of addressing the concerns and apprehensions on the unsustainable processes being promoted in Kuttanad during the recent past, which forecloses the ecosystem services in the name of economic development. He called attention for development of an enabling environment that promote and enhance traditional farming practices by conserving biodiversity and ecosystem service unique to the region. Padmanabhan et.al (2001) also wrote about the economic viability of an integrated and sustainable resource model for Kuttanad.

In the light of climate change and increased awareness about sustainability, Kumar and Devadas (2016) emphasizing the importance of an integrated planning process for sustainable development of ecosensitive zones like Kuttanad. They noted that the planning process for wetland regions in Keralam involves a team of consultants including urban planners, environment engineers and representations from various departments. Their role in the ecological and environmental wellbeing is unparalleled and they pointed out that lack of local knowledge could lead to worsening of existing situation or newer challenges paving ways for possible disasters. In this context, they emphasized the importance of incorporating local knowledge by including the inhabitants of the region in the planning processes to accommodate the various needs and requirements of the existing population for sustainable planning and development.

Abraham (2015) emphasized the importance of taking care of the wetlands in Keralam. She specified that as long as human intervention remained minimal, the ecosystem, through its all-

encompassing balancing nature was self-cleansing but the developments approaches in the State was upsetting the natural harmony. Exposing wetlands being reclaimed with the soil extracted from the hills, she pointed out that these indiscriminate activities would have a serious negative impact on the entire ecological system. She emphasized the necessity of conserving the wetlands as shields against scarcity of water, floods, environmental pollution and distress of micro-climatic vagaries. Consistent with the thoughts put forward by Carson (1962), Heidegger (1977), Giddens (1996 and 2009), Lovelock (2000), Tsing (2005) and Chakrabarty (2009), these studies from Keralam highlight the need for sustainable development and the necessity of taking care of the environment. Emphasising the need for a change in our development perspectives, by rising above differences, they underscore the importance of planning developments in consonance with the environment.

According to Chakrabarty (2015), the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once. Humans today are not only the dominant species on the planet but also collectively constitute a geological force that determines the climate of the planet much to the detriment of civilization itself. He stated that climate change, refracted through global capital, would no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that ran through the rule of capital and some people would no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others. But he emphasized the fact that the whole crisis could not be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, he asserted that there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.

The theoretical discourses connected with social stratifications, development and environment knit together my ethnography about existence in Kuttanad presented in this thesis. This brings an end to the 'Theoretical Perspectives' chapter, shedding light on the arguments brought forth in the ethnography that follows.

Part I
Chapter 3
Land Reclamations

Part I focuses on the physical landscape of Kuttanad and illustrates the complexities connected with the landscape and the inhabitants that dwell in it. This Part includes Chapter 3 and 4 that deals with two of the major issues that have severe implications on the region and the life of its inhabitants - the land reclamations and the floods. All other complexities in the region are directly and indirectly connected to these two key challenges. These two factors play a major role in the transformation of Kuttanad in different ways. Transformation being one of the bottom lines of this research, an exploration of these dynamics is significant. The alterations made on the physical landscape exposed in Part I mirror the social landscape of the region presented in Part II. The alterations disclose the change in the perspectives of the people towards their environment. This change in perspectives towards the physical landscape is closely related to the modifications happening in the social stratifications in Kuttanad. Hence, Part I and II are closely connected. Part I begins with Chapter 3, which deals with land reclamations. The ethnographic account of land reclamations in Kuttanad presented in this chapter, narrates the physical making and unmaking of Kuttanad to suit the changing interests of people and government and its adverse effects on the environment in the region. This change in interests and land utilization pattern is rooted in the wider political and economic dynamics in Kerala, India and the rest of the world. This chapter is a combination of an historical account of the making of the rice fields of Kuttanad in 19th and early 20th centuries and an ethnographic account of the unmaking of the rice fields through land reclamation, which I observed during the days of my fieldwork.

The ‘Creation’ of Kuttanad - The First Major Transformation

Geographically Kuttanad is divided into Old Kuttanad and New Kuttanad.⁸ It is difficult to say due to lack of evidence, when exactly land reclamation as a human effort started in Kuttanad. Records show that from 1834, if not from an earlier period, reclamation had been going on (Letter 1907). In the backdrop of scarcity of documentations, the general consensus of opinion is that almost the whole of what is called New Kuttanad has been reclaimed by the inhabitants from time to time. From the available studies, it is understood that drained by four rivers, the region was extremely fertile which attracted an increasing number of people from near and far to settle down as shown by Kottapparamban (2003). However, the land area being very small

⁸ Old Kuttanad was formed through natural reclamation processes and New Kuttanad was formed through artificial reclamation processes by the inhabitants from time to time.

to support the increasing population, people started reclaiming land for habitation from the shallow portions of the backwaters, adding to the land mass that was already formed by the deposition of sand and silt by the rivers and the sea. As the land for habitation increased and finding the scope for further increasing the land area through reclamation, more and more people migrated from the neighbouring regions to Kuttanad. Since the ancient history of the region is obscure, it is still not clear as to who were the original inhabitants of the region, who first migrated to this region, who owned the lands when rice cultivation started, or who started cultivation and how it was started. At some point in history, the *Namboodirimar* (members of the Namboodiri caste) became the landlords in Kuttanad and they leased their land to the *Nayanmar* (members of the Nayar caste) and the Syrian Christians. The labourers were mainly from the Ezhava and Pulaya castes. However, from the available evidences it could be said that Kuttanad is a speck of naturally and artificially reclaimed land – a world created by Nature (God) and Humans. There is a popular saying about Kuttanad - ‘While God created Earth, Man created Kuttanad’.

The earliest reference to Kuttanad is found in the Sangam literature, the ancient Tamil literature of South India, which dates back to 300 BCE. It is here that is mentioned for the first time, that paddy was cultivated in the Kuttanad region, pointing to the fact that rice is not a new diet in Keralam. The Sangam literature gives a detailed account of the topological divisions of Thamizhakam where Kuttanad region is identified with the fertile tracts of *Marutham* and *Neital* where paddy is said to have been cultivated.⁹ Apart from this, not much is written about the region as being a major producer of rice in any of the later literary works, except some reference by Nieuhoff during the Dutch period and in the accounts of Ward and Conner during the British period. After the Sangam period, references to Kuttanad are mainly political, as political boundaries of the different local kingdoms or economic, as trade and ports. Hence, it can be asserted that after the Sangam period, Kuttanad became prominent again as a major rice producing region, following the large-scale land reclamations in the early 19th century. It is this and the reclamations that followed in the 19th and the early 20th century that created the paddy fields that are now seen in Kuttanad, which transformed the region into a major rice producing zone in southwest India. I call this event, the first major transformation.

Factors that led to Largescale Land Reclamations

In the course of my fieldwork, I did some research into the factors that culminated in the ‘creation’ of Kuttanad as a major rice producing tract. The historical records and secondary sources I collected from the different libraries I visited in Keralam helped me to trace the history

⁹ *Marutham* is wet/agricultural land and *Neital* is coast area.

of land reclamations. I also made use of the research I did for my Masters thesis in History, which is about the history of land reclamations in Kuttanad. An analysis of the factors makes obvious, the contribution of the political and economic vitalities outside Kuttanad in shaping the landscapes of the region. Now let me elaborate these three factors.

1. Commercialization of Agriculture in Travancore

One of the main reasons for large-scale land reclamations in Kuttanad was the commercialization of agriculture in Travancore to meet the needs of the world market. In the first half of the 19th century, the land relations and the mode of production started to change in Travancore, which were the impacts of institutional reforms of the Travancore State as well as the processes that were happening at the world level. The mid-19th century was a period that was characterized by a notable expansion of the world economy. Rammohan (2006) shows how peripheral zones like Travancore got drafted into the world economy. Even though Travancore was linked to the world market from the first millennium, the intensity and scale of 19th century integration broke all records. The forests in the highlands and midlands were cleared to establish plantations of coffee, tea and rubber. It replaced the earlier land use of paddy cultivation in many parts. The ecological aspects of Kerala's highlands coupled with a favourable export market resulted in the growth of commercial crops in Kerala. Production now began to be oriented primarily for the world market. The forests on the lower hills were important sites of rice cultivation practised by tribals and non-tribals alike. It was reported towards the close of the second decade of the 19th century that about 1000 sq. miles of hill slopes were under rice cultivation. Beginning in the 1870s, in order to make these lands available for plantations, the Travancore Government imposed increased restrictions on hill cultivation of rice. By 1890s, land under hill cultivation of rice was reduced to less than 800 sq. miles. Finally, with the spread of rubber that was especially grown in lower hills, bringing new lands under hill rice was completely banned in 1911. An important internal source of rice thus disappeared thereby increasing the demand and the need for producing rice as shown by Rammohan (2006). All these geographical, political and economic changes happening in Travancore and the rest of the world were paving the way for the transformation of the landscapes in Kuttanad. These transformations point at the geographical expansion and spatial reorganization about which Harvey (2003) wrote.

2. Industrialization and Urbanization

The increasing industrialization and urbanisation through factories, like for example, the development of coir mat weaving and coconut oil mills in Alappuzha and the expansion of transportation at the same time evolved a situation of increasing demand for rice in the towns.

With the commercialization of the economy, the workers in the factories and public works department who had migrated to the towns lost access to earlier food sources like tubers, and the workers' diet became more rice-centric, triggering the demand (Rammohan 2006: 17). This necessitated bringing more land under rice cultivation. Here too, the contribution of external influences in the moulding of Kuttanad region becomes apparent.

3. Increase in Population

The population of Travancore increased from around 1,200,000 to 4,000,000 between 1850 and 1920 and the land area became insufficient to support the population. Land continued to be converted to plantations despite the local problems of increasing population and food and land scarcity pointing at the lack of humanity as capitalism gets hold of territories. This resulted in dire shortage of paddy and the import of rice for domestic requirements from Burma, Indonesia, China and from other States in India as shown by the Administrative Report (1928-29). The conditions in Travancore thus came to such a state that it became imperative to increase the production of rice as testified by Government of Kerala (1989). With a good part of the highlands and midlands set apart for plantation and other cash crops, this was possible only in the coastal land. However, the coastal lands too had nearly reached the limits of rice cultivation with dense population and coconut tree gardens grown for the world market as mentioned by Rammohan (2006). At this point, the old myth of Parashuraman mentioned in Chapter 1, repeated itself in a new form. Much like how Keralam came out from the water when Parashuraman threw his battle-axe, Kuttanad emerged from the waters when the *Pulayanmar* (members of the Pulaya caste) dived and set the bunds, which is the story of land reclamation. In the three factors mentioned here, it is possible to see how the changes in the political and economic conditions outside Kuttanad affected the shaping of the region's landscapes and the government's role in the whole event.

Large-scale Land Reclamations

The narration of land reclamation in Kuttanad demonstrates not only the transformation of the the region to a major rice producing zone but also the involvement of the different castes and communities in the whole process. It exposes how the various castes and communities made use of the opportunity for their own betterment. The name of Iravi Keshava Panikkar, a Nayar by caste and Thomas Murickan, a Syrian Christian by community, stand out as magnates in the history of land reclamation in Kuttanad, indicating the high social position held by these castes and communities in the region and the role they played in the 'creation' of the physical landscapes. However, it was the *Pulayanmar* who first evolved the fundamental principle of the technology of reclamation, even though no credit is given to them, as pointed out by

Rammohan (2006). This lack of recognition of Pulaya innovation hints at the social position they held in the region. With all lands in the hands of the *Namboodirimar* and their tenants, the *Nayanmar* and the Syrian Christians, *Pulayanmar* and other landless lower castes and communities were forced to live on the peripheral patches of the landlord's holding or to settle in a common land. The new land masses formed in the backwaters by the silt washed down by the rivers were often occupied by the *Pulayanmar*. Alongside they reclaimed small patches of the river swamps and the shallow portions of the backwaters for sustenance cultivation.¹⁰ However, these local inhabitants of Kuttanad who actually started land reclamation did not know that they were laying the foundation of a great landmark. They reclaimed land from the backwaters just to meet their immediate needs, which were mainly habitation and sustenance agriculture.

Seeing the technique developed by the local population, Iravi Keshava Panikkar from the Chalayil family, one of the leading Nayar aristocrats in Kuttanad tried to apply it on a large-scale when the conditions in Travancore became miserable as illustrated by Pillai and Panikkar (1965). Beginning in the early 1800s, he and his Pulaya labourers, thus created large stretches of land from the backwaters and converted them into paddy fields. Following the success of the large-scale land reclamation by Iravi Keshava Panikkar, others, again mainly Syrian Christians like Pallithanam Luca Mathai, Kalathil Anthony Mappila, Chirayil Thomman Mappila, Thomas Murickan, to name just four, followed suit. Prakash (1987) confirms that there had been a steady increase in the area and production of paddy during the period 1800 and 1860. This increase, which Prakash mentions is obviously due to increased land reclamations. As a result, besides meeting the domestic requirements, paddy was exported since 1840s. The State's approval of the endeavour further encouraged reclamation of land from Vembanad *Kayal* (lake) for rice cultivation.

During the depression period between mid-1920s and mid-1930s the price of paddy fell in the world market. As Travancore was closely linked to the world market, the depression had an immediate impact on its economy. It affected all crops. The price of paddy during the first half of the 1930s was so low that paddy cultivation in Kuttanad became uneconomic as detailed by Prakash (1987: 22). As a result, for a decade from the 1920s onwards, reclamation activities also came to a low. This indicates the extent of the impact of external factors in the moulding and remoulding of the landscapes of Kuttanad. However, in the 1930s, when a severe famine struck the State, an immense necessity again occurred in Travancore to bring more land under

¹⁰ According to Kamalasanan (1993), there is evidence of a Syrian Christian family obtaining a stretch of reclaimed land from a Pulayan (a member of the Pulaya caste) during the early decades of the 19th century.

cultivation. This was followed by acute scarcity of foodgrains during the Second World War when the supplies of rice from Burma and Siam (Thailand) were cut off by the Japanese occupation. Government of Travancore (1943) and Pillai and Panikkar (1965) have written about this event of foodgrains shortage. People were then forced to eat pearl millet and maize instead of rice. At this point, the King in Travancore asked the agriculturists to bring in more land under paddy cultivation. Thus, reclamation again gained momentum through the government's Grow More Food campaign, which sought to increase agricultural production. In this second phase of land reclamation, the challenge was taken up by a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Kuttanad named Thomas Murickan who dug about 946.96 hectares of paddy field from the Vembanad *Kayal*. This considerably increased the paddy production in Travancore in the 1940s. Hence, by creating land from the backwaters and converting them into paddy fields, the problem of food and land scarcity was met efficiently by human efforts and at the same time, it prepared the ground for the development of Kuttanad as a rice tract of noble significance.

Large-scale land reclamations were essentially started under private auspices. Though the State came into the picture at an early stage, the role of the State was passive by only encouraging the endeavour. In the initial years of reclamation, no financial help was also received from the State. Hence only a very few enterprising and immensely rich landlord-cultivators could take up reclamation. Here, it has to be noted that it was mainly the *Nayanmar* and the Syrian Christians who had the ability and facility to do this at that time. Together with exposing the social position, power and influence of these castes and communities, it also reveals their desire and efforts towards social mobility. The fact that the *Namboodirimar* were not ready to take up the risk involved in reclamation also needs notice, as this points at the social situation of these different castes and communities in the region.¹¹ It could be stated that by creating new landscapes and transforming the old structures, the *Nayanmar* and the Syrian Christians were producing new structures that were favourable for them, in the place of the old. The *Nayanmar* and the Syrian Christians were the former tenants of the *Namboodiri* landlords in the region. The Pattom Proclamation of 1865 made them owners of the land they leased from the *Namboodirimar*. The new land reclamations made them owners of the land they reclaimed making them further independent from the hold of the *Namboodiri* landlords. Later when paddy cultivation in the reclaimed lands became more and more successful, the attitude of the State changed. Backwaters being State property, permission of the government became necessary to reclaim it. However, from the 1880s, besides giving permission, the State actively stepped in

¹¹ I have discussed this topic in detail in Chapter 7.

by offering loans and concessions as can be detected in the Administrative Report (1888)¹² and Government of Travancore (1914).

The State support increased the frequency of large-scale land reclamations from the backwaters and people from different parts of North Travancore started investing large sums of money in reclaiming lands wherever possible after obtaining registry in their names as seen in Government of Kerala (1971). The proposition was attractive, but accessing it hinged on nearness to government authority. Rather than landless labourers far removed from the sanctuary of power, it was the already influential high castes and communities who had much greater chances of getting the permission and concessions for taking up reclamations as shown by Narayanan (2003). This worked to the advantage of castes and communities like the *Nayanmar* and the Syrian Christians with educated members who were familiar with the ways of modern government, facilitating permission to reclaim. The local moneylenders also became active and contributed in the entire development by supplying money to those interested in reclamations. Tamil *Brahmananmar* (members of the Tamil Brahmin caste) were the main moneylenders in Kuttanad. As shown by Rammohan (2006: 32), they started settling in Kuttanad in larger numbers, following the success of land reclamations and the transformation of region into a major rice producing zone. This signifies the social formation of a region following its physical transformation and the determinations of the different castes and communities to benefit from the event. All of this together resulted in the making of Kuttanad as a major rice producing region of southwest India. When all this remain embedded in the landscapes of the region as its history, what I observed at the time of my fieldwork was the unmaking of Kuttanad into a non-rice producing region.

New Land Reclamations – The Second Major Transformation

My awareness of the change of the region from a wetland to a dryland aroused my curiosity and my investigation into the matter brought before me one of the most serious issues of the region – the new land reclamations. My interest in the affair led me to search for the people transforming the region which gave me the knowledge that land in Kuttanad is now reclaimed for mainly three purposes: infrastructural development, commercial development and habitation. Parallel to this, urbanizing trends were also observed. Now I shall look into each of these intentions and the urbanizing tendencies observed in the region.

¹² Government Publication.

1. *Infrastructural Development*

A part of the land that is reclaimed is appropriated by the government for all kinds of infrastructural developments like laying roads, constructing government buildings, building petrol pumps, bus stations, airports and so on, all in the name of ‘development’ of the region. I observed numerous roads criss-crossing Kuttanad during my fieldwork. Similarly, I noticed quite a number of government offices that are build on reclaimed tracts like the Village Office and the Taluk Office in Moncompu. I also observed a number of government petrol pumps spread across the different villages of Kuttanad like the Indian Oil in Nedumudi, the Bharat Petroleum in Moncumpu, etc. to name just two. This is in addition to private petrol pumps in the region. I also observed public bus stations in Champakulam, Kavalam, Kumarakom, etc. Likewise, there was an effort to build an international airport in Aranmula in Kuttanad, which had to be dropped due to popular resistance.¹³ So a good extent of land was seen filled up by the government itself.

2. *Commercial Development*

A vast stretch of land is also reclaimed for commercial purposes such as shops, supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, resorts, petrol pumps, etc. by private entrepreneurs. All these commercial constructions lay scattered all over Kuttanad. I observed innumerable provision shops situated on reclaimed lands in all the villages I visited. Mahalakshmi Supermarket in Moncompu, Nakshatra Supermarket in Champakulam, Suresh Stores in Thakazhi, Jacob’s Agencies in Nedumudi, etc are some of the new supermarkets I came across during my fieldwork. In addition to supermarkets, I also noted a number of new electronic and electronic appliances shops like Ponnus Communications in Mithrakari, Hi Techno Solutions in Nedumudi, Vodafone Tower and Technocare Systems and Services in Kavalam, the electrical shop for car Air Conditioning and related electrical items in Ramankari, the mobile service centre called Mobile Care in Thakazhi, etc. I also observed quite a number of restaurants and hotels in the villages like the Hotel Aryaas in Moncompu, Avees restaurants in Pulinkunnu and Ramankari, Memories Multi-Cuisine restaurant in Ramankari, etc. to name just a few. The restuarants run by the resorts in the different villages are in addition to these. In this way, commercial constructions are seen popping up far and wide in Kuttanad.

Due to privacy reasons and also because activities related with land reclamations are contentious issues in the region, I am not disclosing the details of my informants who reclaimed land for commercial purposes in my study area. However, my research revealed that these reclaimers include both the inhabitants and the non-inhabitants. They included people from

¹³ This is dicussed in detail later in this chapter.

different castes and communities mainly *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* (members of the Ezhava caste) and Syrian Christians and to a lesser degree low caste converted Christians and *Pulayanmar*. I only had a few informants from the Namboodir and Tamil Brahmin castes and that could be a reason why I did not see any one of them involved in commercial reclamations in Kuttanad. It must be noted that in the 19th and 20th centuries land reclamations were done by the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians but at the time of my fieldwork it was done not only by the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians but *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converts also joined in the transformation. However, it is mainly the non-agricultural community who are more engaged in commercial reclamations. The involvement of these castes and communities in the new land reclamation activities transforming the physical landscapes of Kuttanad has to be underscored as it points at their efforts in bringing changes in the social stratifications in the region. However, it has to be noted that there are other social, economic, political and cultural factors happening in Keralam and India also that are responsible for the transformations happening in the local social stratifications in Kuttanad.¹⁴ It is in addition to that the inhabitants are altering the physical landscapes with the hope of modifying the social stratifications. The tourism lobby is a major player in this context. The real-estate industry is actively engaged in reclamations related with commercial purposes. They are often referred to as ‘land mafia’ in Kuttanad due to their alleged illegal land reclamation activities using social, economic and political influence and power, ignoring the environment conservation laws. Both the tourism industry and the real-estate industry includes people from the above-mentioned castes and communities mainly *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians, a few Latin Catholics and *Pulayanmar* and almost no *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*.

I was interested in knowing more about the real-estate business related with commercial activities in the region. Hence, during my fieldwork in Kottayam, I interviewed some *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and Latin Catholics who were engaged in real-estate business. I knew some of them from before I started my PhD and that helped me to get in touch with the others. I learned from them that those in the real-estate industry buy paddy fields and fill it up with earth, in order to sell it. I did some enquiries into the sale of properties in my study area. I found that the value and demand of properties near roads were extremely high in the real-estate market due to scope for further development and possibilities of personal capital enhancement. Construction of roads are often followed by other developments like the growth of village-towns and other townships, which gave the owners with properties near roads, the opportunities to start new commercial enterprises. Such opportunities and possibilities helped people to make money and rise up in the class society. Another surprising consequence was brought to my

¹⁴ I have discussed this topic in Chapters 7 and 8.

attention by Kurien, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Puthukari who is a family friend. He was actively engaged in cultivation activities when I met him. He said, “Forty years back, the value of land used to be regulated by the quality of the soil but now, it is determined more by the extent of ‘development’ that has come about.” Marriages are fixed with regard to whether there are roads to the girl’s or the boy’s house and not whether there are waterways and how much paddy land the family owns. In this way, the coming of roads and the increase in the value of the properties near the roads increased land reclamation activities and was a boost to the real-estate industry.

When this was the case with properties near roads, I found that when compared to them and to the towns of Keralam, the price of land in the interiors of Kuttanad, where water is still the main mode for accessibility, is extremely low in the real-estate market. I shall illustrate this with an example. Chachappan is a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator who has properties in Champakulam. He is a family friend and that is how I contacted him. His properties are not located near the Champakulam town. He has two acres of cultivable land near a mud road. The price offered for this piece of land is Rupees 14 lakhs (16,985.15 Euro) per acre. He also has two acres of cultivable land at a place where there are no roads and the price offered is only 9 lakhs (10,917.06 Euro) per acre. His relative Lalichan has properties in Mampuzhakari near the AC Road. The price offered there is Rupees 1 crore (121,306.79 Euro) per acre. So there is a wide difference in the price of properties near and away from roads. On various occasions, I came across twelve informants who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and low caste converted Christians living in the interiors of Kainakari who were desperately trying to sell their property. They were in need of money but were unable to sell their property because of the low prices offered. Some others I met in Chembumpuram and Karumadi were forced to sell their lands at low prices due to financial necessities. The real-estate people take advantage of this and buy land at low prices and sell it at higher prices to persons, groups or companies with private or commercial interests. There are even instances of the latter buying land directly from the inhabitants without the mediation of real-estate dealers. The sellers prefer sale without the mediation of agents because then they would get a better deal and they also do not have to give commissions to the agents.

At the time of my fieldwork when Kuttanad was increasingly becoming infamous for its environment related problems and the inhabitants were trying to migrate out, I wondered who was interested in buying land in Kuttanad and the reasons behind it. According to my informants from the real-estate industry whom I met in Kottayam, with the development of transport and communication, Kuttanad now has a prime location close to major townships in Keralam like

Alappuzha, Changanassery, Kottayam, Thiruvalla, etc. Hence, the region is no more remote or inaccessible as it was fifty years ago. Henceforth, the possibility of Kuttanad also developing into a major town in the near future is not so unlikely. Hence, this is a reason why people, especially the entrepreneurs mainly from outside Kuttanad are interested in the region. The interest of entrepreneurs in buying land in Kuttanad suggests the spatial strategies employed by the capitalists to create and protect monopoly powers as claimed by Harvey (2003).

During my fieldwork in Kottayam and Changanassery, I met forty-five entrepreneurs who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and Latin Catholics who were interested in doing business in the region. I tracked them through my informants who were running home appliances and electronic shops in the different villages of Kuttanad and also through my informants who were engaged in the tourism industry. Summing up the conversations I had separately with each one of them on separate occasions, their attitude was that by starting new enterprises, they were helping the region and the inhabitants to develop. These statements are comparable to what Brosius (1999) specified about how economic powers intrude into societies in the guise of supporting the environment. The entrepreneurs in this context are not promising help in support of the environment but on the contrary, their promises are in fact to deviate the inhabitants out of their activities that are favourable to the environment. Hence, land reclamations with commercial interests were seen rising in my study area at the time of my fieldwork. Having elucidated land reclamations for commercial development, I now turn to reclamations for habitation purposes.

3. *Habitation*

I grasped that inhabitants also reclaim land, mainly for building houses. Each landless family is permitted by law to reclaim 0.04 hectare (10 cents) of land. Thus, a family with five children can reclaim 0.20 hectare (50 cents) of land. The value of land is much higher when it is converted from wetland to dryland that is, when converted into reclaimed real-estate plots. Due to the increasing complexities in cultivating paddy and as reclamation increased the value of the land in the real-estate market, inhabitants were more interested in filling up their paddy fields and waterbodies adjacent to their houses and properties with the hope of using it for purposes other than cultivation. This was 'development' for them. It was often possible to see tiny bits of reclaimed land around houses of people, irrespective of castes and communities, in the different villages I visited. In this way, reclamation of land and encroachment of waterbodies increased rapidly in my study area. Interestingly, little land is being filled up for agricultural purposes. Studies by Varghese (1995) and Irshad (2008) shows similar analysis. Varghese (1995) asserted that those who invested in real-estate property in Keralam were not

engaged in agriculture but in business. Irshad (2008) stated that in Keralam more importance is given to habitation and townships than to agriculture. Menon (1983) had asserted that due to the galloping value of land throughout Keralam for non-agricultural purposes, the owner profited much more by selling it than by continuing to use it for the cultivation of rice. When this was the condition thirty-seven years back, I would say that at the time of my fieldwork, this tendency was enormous. It could be said that the modification of the landscapes in Kuttanad is clearly due to the human perception of their environment as a commodity to be transformed as stated by Ingold (2000). Now I shall turn to the increasing tendencies of urbanization observed in my study area exposing changes in the land utilization patterns.

Increasing Urbanization

Even though Kuttanad now has a diffused land use pattern with a mix of agricultural and non-agricultural activities centred mainly on tourism, business and construction industry, I noticed that it is still in many respects an agricultural area. However, urbanization is seen to be increasing with the development of transport and communication. I noticed a number of village-towns (prospective main towns) popping up here and there, especially near main road sides with new shops and buildings mostly constructed on newly reclaimed lands from the adjoining waterbodies or paddy fields. In such village-towns, there would be a few vegetable and grocery shops, textile shops, medical shops, ATM counters, internet cafes, hotels, restaurants, auto and taxi stands, bus stops, etc. A trip through the Alappuzha-Changanassery Road is more than enough to find these village-towns right from Changanassery all the way through Kuttanad until Alappuzha.

Kuttanad includes a number of major and minor towns in and around the region like Alappuzha, Changanassery, Kottayam, Thiruvalla, etc. I found it interesting to note the development of townships in the peripheries of Kuttanad. When Kuttanad developed into a major rice producing region from the latter half of the 19th century, urban centres developed in the peripheries of Kuttanad as centres of trade. Modern institutions like banks, schools and colleges were established in these towns. Thiruvalla established the first English medium school of Travancore. Alappuzha developed as an important port, which later became an industrial town with the setting up of the coir industry. Changanassery developed as an important market town, with banking and educational institutions. The peripheries of Kuttanad gave rise to spatial and social functions that were intimately evolving from the material production of rice. At the same time, the urbanisation at the fringes was also a process of spatial demarcation of Kuttanad. But at the time of my fieldwork, these towns had developed into areas with more significance, thereby sidelining the region into a less important rural suburb. The development of these urban

areas no longer depend on the production from Kuttanad. At the same time, development of Kuttanad depends on its relation with these urban areas. The urbanizing trend found in Kuttanad made me feel that it could be an indication of a shift to the future nerve centre.

This change in the land use pattern in Kuttanad, more in the direction of township was encouraging around seventy of my cultivator informants who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians to opt out of paddy cultivation and engage in non-agricultural activities as drivers,¹⁵ headload workers, or start commercial shops, etc. I met these informants in the different villages on various occasions. This urbanizing trend was encouraging even more inhabitants to fill up their paddy fields and waterbodies also, with the assumption that they could make more money by engaging in non-agricultural activities. Thirty-seven years back Menon (1983) wrote that one of the features of urbanization in Keralam is the sprawling character of urban growth, where one can see paddy fields being reclaimed as housing sites throughout the countryside. If this was the case in the 1980s, it had increased many more times during my fieldwork period leading to severe changes in land utilization in the direction of urbanization. Kumar and Devadas (2016: 1661) has pointed out that Keralam is one of the fastest urbanizing States of India. They show that as per the census of 2001 and 2011, Keralam has achieved an urbanization rate of 83% and is expected to increase with the changes in employment pattern and income sources. They also stated that most of this urbanization has occurred in an unplanned manner. The adverse effects of these urbanizing trends in my study area were the shrinking of paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands.

Besides reclamation and encroachment, all these changes in the land utilization inspired many inhabitants, especially those who were not interested in paddy cultivation to intentionally leave their paddy fields fallow in order to reclaim it for habitation or commercial purposes, or to sell it later. Leaving the fields barren and uncultivated for many years helped them to deter the laws and rules preventing land reclamation and enabled easy sale of agricultural land from the hands of rice cultivators to the real-estate dealers and ultimately to the capitalist entrepreneurs. Even though this tendency could be seen even in the 1980s, it increased from around the mid 1990s and could be associated to the new developments following the new economic policies. The emergence of the real-estate industry during this period is also related to this trend. Menon (1983), Cheriyan (2004), John (2004), James (2005), Priyadarshanan (2008) and Maniyosai and Kuruvilla (2015) have also illustrated this tendency among those engaged in agriculture.

¹⁵ Drivers of rickshaw, taxi, truck, bus, etc.

I met informants who worried over this tendency in the different parts of Kuttanad, which pointed to the fact that not everyone in this region supports the transformation process. They belonged mainly to the agricultural community and included *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. It has to be noted that both agricultural community and non-agricultural community include people from all these castes and communities. Hence, it cannot be said that it is people from one particular caste or community who are reclaiming the paddy fields. The division is based on people's interest in agriculture or non-agricultural activities. However, both sections desired to make profit and money, as we will see in the coming pages of this thesis. Summing up my informants' opinion, Keralam being a small State in India, the land area for agriculture is proportionately small and so when the available fields are filled up or left fallow and uncultivated, the production of rice would decrease further. During one of my interviews with Thomas Peelianickal, the former Director of Kuttanad Vikasana Samithy (KVS) he said, 'The land in Kuttanad is very fragile. People here want to build flats like in Ernakulam and Mumbai. A change must happen to the concept of "development". It is not possible to make Kuttanad into New York. It is like making an elephant into a tiger. People must learn to understand realities and respect their environment.' He continued, 'If people want to live in New York, let them go and live there and leave Kuttanad alone for those who respect the region.'¹⁶ However, the physical landscape continues to be altered amidst cries of concern from one section of inhabitants.

It was found that people from almost all castes and communities were trying or waiting for an opportunity to fill up the rice producing Kuttanad for non-rice producing activities. All transformations in the landscapes pointed at the changing interests and perspectives in the region and the resulting contest over the resources. The physical landscape hence mirrored the social and economic landscapes, and the transformation of the region. The paradox is that Kuttanad itself is a reclaimed, human-made region, created by filling up the waterbodies with the expressed intention to produce paddy. But now the same paddy fields are being filled up and turned into a new landscape to serve new interests -- the second major transformation.

The Impact of New Land Reclamations

It has been found that people have to pay the price for the physical transformation of Kuttanad, which is done for bringing social transformation. The two most striking implications of the new land reclamations are the shrinking of paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands leading to shortage of rice in Keralam along with the transformation of Kuttanad from a rice producing

¹⁶ Since in Chapter 9, I have written more about Thomas Peelianickal and KVS, I am not detailing it here.

region to a non-rice producing region and secondly the environmental degradation of the entire wetland causing ecological imbalances. These severely affect the life and livelihood of the region, especially the agricultural community, who form the majority of the population.

Reduction in the Area under Rice

Kuttanad is one of the three regions in Keralam where rice is cultivated to a significant degree; the other two being Palakkad and Thrissur. Malappuram also cultivates rice to some extent.¹⁷ Kuttanad is 2.9% of Keralam. Keralam is 1.18% of the Indian subcontinent.¹⁸ Even though the diminution in the area under rice could be observed in all the paddy producing regions in Keralam, my study and analysis is based on the paddy fields of Kuttanad region alone. Although the dwindling in the area under paddy and waterbodies was not very noticeable to me at first, as wherever I looked I could see paddy fields and waterbodies, my research into the matter ascertained this development. Numerous studies conducted in Keralam also testify this fact. Let us look at Keralam first. It is discerned from the findings of Menon (1983), Prakash (1987), Narayana (1990), Cheriyan (2004: 27), Government of Kerala (2009-10) and Nair and Dhanuraj (2016: 5-6) that the area under rice in Keralam increased from around 1950s to around 1975 and then after a short period of stagnation, started declining from around 1980 until 2010. Government of Kerala (2009-10) stated that the area under rice in Keralam which had reached 0.876 million hectare during 1975-1976 from 0.753 million hectare during 1961-1962 had since then recorded a steady decrease. By 2009-2010, the area under paddy decreased to 0.234 million hectare recording 73.28% decrease in a span of about 30-40 years. The decline continued and in 2017-18, it was only 0.189 million hectare (See Table 1).

When these are the figures related with Keralam, when it comes to Kuttanad, Swaminathan (2007:12-13) asserted that in 1967 about 60,921 hectares were under paddy in Kuttanad, but in 2003 it declined to 37,624 hectares. Thomas's (2002) study on Kuttanad region also shows decline in paddy area, especially from the year 1991-2000. An Analytical Study on Agriculture in Kerala (2016) shows that there has been an increase in the area under paddy in Kuttanad region. This can be noticed during the period 2008-09 to 2011-12 when the area increased from 0.044 million hectares to 0.056 million hectares as shown in Table 2. According to informants belonging to the agricultural community I met in Mampuzhakari, Ramankari, Kainakari and Champakulam there are mainly two reasons behind this increase. The first reason was the

¹⁷Area under rice in India as on 2010-2011 is 36.95 million hectares (www.airea.net). The area under rice in Keralam during the agricultural year 2016-2017 was 171,398 hectares (Government of Kerala 2017-18). Area under rice in Kuttanad during the agricultural year 2017-18 was 50928.4 hectares (Agricultural Statistics, Government of Kerala 2018).

¹⁸ The State of Keralam is spread over an area of 3.8863 million hectares. The Indian subcontinent occupies over an area of 328.7 million hectares.

efforts of those interested in paddy cultivation, in bringing paddy lands that were left fallow and barren in the region back to cultivation. My informants in Kainakari, Pulinkunnu, Kavalam and Champakulam showed me several paddy fields in the villages that were brought back to cultivation by them in this way. Secondly, as a result of their efforts, more absentee landlords, especially those living outside the region are becoming interested in cultivation and leasing out their fields for cultivation than before, rather than leaving them fallow. I had observed this inclination during the time of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, I learned that there are many who still leave their fields fallow. However, even if there was an increase in the area under paddy in Kuttanad region for a short period, overall when we look at it, we can see that the area under rice in Kuttanad has been declining since 1990-91 to 2017-18 as shown in Table 2. This decrease is mainly due to increasing land reclamations for divergent purposes.

The Swaminthan report had remarked that even retention of remaining rice area in Kuttanad is becoming a serious challenge. He warned that a linear projection of the decline in this proportion would lead to the disappearance of paddy cultivation and it may well become a history by 2020. However, even when I finished my fieldwork in 2018, paddy was still being cultivated and was not showing any signs of becoming history in 2020. The credit for this could be attributed to the resistances posed by the agricultural community. Even though several changes are happening in and around the region that point towards the extinction of paddy cultivation, it still continues to survive giving an impression that it would continue for some more years. How and why did the area under paddy fields shrink? Where did all the paddy fields disappear? As noted earlier, it was filled up for infrastructural developments, commercial developments and habitation by both the people and the government.

Cash Crops and Food Crops

Together with land reclamations for infrastructural developments, commercial developments and habitation purposes, I came across another reason also that affected the production of rice. It is the importance given to cash crops like rubber, tea, coconut, cashew, cardamom, coffee, arecanut, pepper, etc. over food crops like rice in Kerala. There had been efforts to grow crops other than paddy in Kuttanad in the 1980s but due to popular resistance and also due to the region's special geographic features, which is suitable only for growing paddy, the efforts failed. India Today (February 1983) has reported about the effort made by the Rubber Board in Kerala to convert the paddy fields in Kuttanad to rubber plantations. Even though not much land in Kuttanad is converted for growing cash crops, the implications of the importance given to more remunerative and less labour-absorbing cash crops in other parts of the State is felt in Kuttanad. This is pointed out by my agricultural community informants from the villages of

Mampuzhakari, Ramankari and Mithrakari with whom I discussed about cash crops, as a reason why paddy cultivation is given less importance by the government. My informants included landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators who were Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. Reports such as Government of Kerala (1974), The Punja Special Officer (1982)¹⁹ and Government of Kerala (2009:7) have acknowledged the importance given by the government for cash crops over food crops and hence ratifies the statement of my informants.

My research into the matter further confirmed that the transformation of Keralam into an exporter of perennial cash crops went side by side with its transformation into a foodgrain deficit State. Numerous studies show this slow and steady transformation of the agricultural land utilization in Keralam like Government of Kerala (1974), Tharamangalam (1981), Prakash (1987), Jinraj (1999), Padmanabhan et.al (2001: 5), Mahesh (2002), Thomas (2002), Shankar (2005) and Swaminathan (2007). These studies show that the shift in favour of cash crops in Keralam started increasing from around the 1960s, showing a tremendous swing towards cash crops from around mid-1970s. The scope for further expansion of land for food crops being limited this trend was adversely affecting the food production in the State. The crop that showed remarkable expansion was rubber. Cheriyan (2004: 26) showed that rubber had more than doubled in area during the period 1980 and 2000. Rubber was followed by coconut and pepper. Varghese (1995) showed that according to the Rubber Board, in 1980-81, 0.15 million tonnes rubber was produced from 0.275 million hectare land. In 1990-91 the production tripled to 0.475 million tonnes rubber from 0.525 million hectare of land. According to the Rubber Board, this increase could be due to the conversion of paddy lands in Keralam to rubber plantation.

In Kannan's (2000) view, the political economy of the decline in rice cultivation is closely related to the larger political economy of development in Keralam. Cheriyan (2004: 5) argued that the sustainable performance and the traditional cropping pattern of the State were challenged by liberalization, privatization, globalization, and the general opening up of the Indian economy. Jerome (2005) clarified that more than 80% of the agricultural commodities produced in Keralam are dependent on domestic or international markets. As the economy was relatively closed till the 1990s, cultivation of commercial crops like coconut, rubber, tea, coffee, spices, etc., were fairly profitable even without much improvement in productivity and value addition because of a protected internal market and prospects for exports. However, with the opening up of the economy and removal of quantitative restrictions on imports from the 1990s, commercial crops have been affected by imports, especially after the free trade agreement with Sri Lanka, and stiff competition in the international market. According to him, being the major

¹⁹ Government Publication.

cash crop producing State in India, Keralam is most affected by the trade liberalization policy of the Government of India. Hence, there are several factors at play that now determine the agricultural conditions in Keralam and Kuttanad.

Apart from the fact that this transformation of the economy adversely affected the food crop producers, did it bring any benefit to the cash crop producers? The answer is, not entirely. In 1979, Jayachandran (1979) pointed out that even the perennial crop producers in the State were exposed because the price of these cash crops was decided by the world market, resulting in a fluctuating market for their produce. Later, Nair and Ramakumar (2007) also stated that the proximate cause of agrarian distress in Keralam was the sharp fall in the prices of plantation crops, especially coconut, rubber, coffee, tea, pepper and cardamom. Together, these six crops accounted for about 60% of the gross cropped area in 2000-01. Nair and Ramakumar showed that in the second half of the 1990s, these commodities had been subjected to frequent fluctuations. The downward trend experienced after the mid-1990s in the prices of these plantation crops of Keralam had been the reflection of a downward spiral in the prices of these commodities at the international level. Hence, it can be said that the landscape of Keralam was altered since the late 19th century for the world market, sacrificing food crops to cash crops and the process continues. It exposes the broader political and economic conditions that stipulate and influence rice production in Kuttanad and the role of the government in the whole development.



Photos 1 and 2. Land reclamation by filling up paddy fields.

Reduction in the Area under Waterbodies

Together with the reduction in the area under paddy, there is also reduction in the area under waterbodies. The best example in Kuttanad is the Vembanad *Kayal*, the longest lake and the largest wetland system in India. The lake is over 96.5 km in length and approximately 14 km wide at its widest point. The Vembanad Wetland System was included in the list of wetlands of international importance by the Ramsar Convention for the conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands in 2002.²⁰ It is the largest of the three Ramsar Sites in Keralam; the others being the Ashtamudi Wetland and Shasthamkotta Lake. However, the Vembanad *Kayal* has been heavily reclaimed over the years. According to Roopa and Vijayan (2017), the lake, which was 8,128 hectares in 1967 shrunk to 7,522 hectares by 2014. A number of studies like Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999) and Narendran (2010) have also noted reduction in the area under the lake. During my trips around the banks of the lake, I have observed the reclaimed portions of the lake but I had to depend on secondary sources to study the reduction in the size of the lake. The reduction in the area of the Vembanad *Kayal* is in addition to the reclamations

²⁰ The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance is an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. It is also known as the Convention on Wetlands. The Convention on Wetlands signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty, which provides the framework for national action and international co-operation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources (Swaminathan 2007). It is named after the city of Ramsar in Iran, where the Convention was signed in 1971. Every three years, representatives of the Contracting Parties meet at the Conference of the Parties (COP), the policy-making organ of the convention, which adopts decisions (resolutions and recommendations) to administer the work of the convention and improve the way in which the parties are able to implement its objectives.

and encroachments in the rest of the rivers and canals in Kuttanad. I found that the waterbodies are reclaimed by people irrespective of castes and communities for commercial and habitational purposes. As these are contentious issues in the region, I keep the names and locations of people confidential.



Photo 3. Land reclamation by filling up waterbodies.

Reduction in the Area under Wetlands

Keralam has the largest proportion of land area under wetlands among all the States of India. According to Abraham (2015), the total wetland area estimated in Keralam is about 160,590 hectares. The major wetland types are rivers/ streams (65,162 hectares), lagoons (38,442 hectares), reservoirs (26,167 hectares) and waterlogged lands (20,305 hectares). Having the largest wetland ecosystem on the west coast of India, more than two-thirds of the total land area in Kuttanad is wetlands (Thomas 2002: 13). The other districts in Keralam having wetlands are Ernakulam, Kollam, Thrissur and Wayanad. Changes in the land use pattern due to new land reclamations, leading to reduction in the area of paddy fields and waterbodies also denote reduction in the area of wetlands. Quite a number of studies like Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999: 67) and Mahesh (2002) to name two, show reduction in the area under wetlands in Keralam. They assert that the degradation of the wetlands in the State was happening at a great pace. Cheriyan (2004:26) noted that the area converted for cultivation of perennial crops and non-agricultural uses before 1968 was only 0.063 million hectare whereas between 1968 and 1992 the corresponding figure was 0.172 million hectare. These together formed 40.94% of the total wetland in the State. She noted that this entire area had been filled up and rendered unsuitable for rice cultivation and this condition is deteriorating further.

Almost all the people I met knew about the shrinking of paddy fields, waterbodies and the wetlands due to anthropogenic activities. However, I realized that even though they all suffered

the ecological consequences of the transformations in the landscapes, not everyone was concerned about the predicament. Most of them were found busy trying to benefit from the transformations making the state of affairs in Kuttanad akin to Giddens's (2009) observation. Even though he was writing about global climate change, his view that only a few are willing to alter their lives even though the people are aware of the threat of global warming is similar to what I observed in my context of study.

Reduction in the Production of Rice and Shortage of Rice

The prime consequence of the reduction in the area under paddy, waterbodies and wetlands is reduction in the production of rice, leading to shortage of rice in the State. Keralam accommodates 33.3 million people, which is 2.76% of India's population (Census of 2011). Rice is the staple food of the people in Keralam, which is consumed three to four times a day. Having consumed rice continuously for more than two hundred years in the State, it has become the staple food of the State and the symbol of Malayali diet and is linked to the sentimentalities of ordinary Keralites.

The gap between production and consumption of rice within Keralam is widening and this is increasingly becoming a cause of insecurity and worry among the people of Keralam. According to Kannan (2000: 5-6), Kerala's deficit in rice was 50-55% from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s. Since then the deficit increased steadily. From the national view, he noted that, Keralam accounted for only 1.3% of the production in India till the mid-1970s but this came further down. According to Kannan, if there is a continuing trend in the decline of the area under rice and an increase in the requirement of rice, as a result of population increase, the deficit was likely to go up. He noted that the figures in 1998-1999 showed that rice production in the State had declined to 0.73 million tonnes, that is, only around 20% of the requirement (See Table 3.). When it comes to Kuttanad, Thomas (2002) showed that production of paddy in Kuttanad region declined from 0.227 million tonnes in 1990 to 0.152 million tonnes in 2000. Table 4 also shows that from 2008-18 the production of rice in Kuttanad had not increased much and in 2017-18 it was equal to as in 1998-99. When we look at the period from 1990-2018 there is reduction in the production of rice. Swaminathan (2007: 90) stated that Kuttanad's contribution in the production of rice in Keralam declined from 37% in the 1970s to 18% in 2003. In effect, Keralam ceased to be a foodgrain producing State of any significance. These studies indicate the depth of the predicament of rice shortage in the State, the need to augment production and take care of food producing regions like Kuttanad.

As my research into the matter proceeded, I came across a report by Government of Kerala (2002). It showed that the population of the State being around 30 million and the per capita cultivated land only about 0.08 hectare and the average number of dwellings per sq.km about 110 compared to the national average, one unit of land in Keralam had to sustain 3.6 times the national average population. Therefore, every unit of land in Keralam has to produce 3.6 times more food than the national average. According to the report, it is not possible for Keralam to eliminate the gap between production and consumption of rice and to produce enough to feed the whole population. However, those belonging to the agricultural community were of the opinion that if fallow and barren lands are brought back to cultivation, land reclamations are reduced and illegal reclamations are stopped completely, there would be a great difference in the area and production of paddy in Keralam. They mentioned about the period 2005-2015 when there was increase in the area under paddy in Kuttanad as an example. This predicament of disparity between production and consumption of rice prompted me to look into how the State was dealing with such a situation and how my informants responded to such a dilemma.

Import of Rice

In the background of growing population, increasing area under perennial crops and non-agricultural purposes and limited area under rice, the only way the government could meet the increasing rice demands of the rice deficit State is through imports. Keralam, at the time of my fieldwork, imported rice from neighbouring States like Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and the Centre. However, it has to be mentioned that import of rice into the State is not a new happening. Records and studies show that Travancore and later Keralam has been importing rice from early times as verified by Government of Travancore (1943), Prakash (1987), Government of Kerala (1989), Jinraj (1999: 3), Padmanabhan et.al (2001: 5) and John (2004:7).

In the context of Kuttanad being unable to produce enough rice to feed the population of Keralam and the possibility for importing rice being available, the question asked by 90% of my informants who supported the utilization of the region for non-agricultural purposes was, 'Why is it so indispensable to have homegrown rice?' The question why Kuttanad should produce rice lingered throughout my fieldwork period. I met Raju, a Nayar by caste, during my fieldwork in Kumarakom. He was running a homestay as part of the tourism business in Kumarakom. Taking examples from history, he pointed out instances of changes in the dietary habits of the people in Keralam that later became normalized. For example, tapioca and wheat are new food products that has now become part of the normal diet of the people in Keralam. Similarly, there are instances of deficit times in Keralam, when the State even gave up rice consumption for other food. The Second World War period is an example. I came across an

announcement made by the Travancore Government regarding change of diet during the Second World War period, which I would like to add here. Government of Travancore (1943) announced: 'The government is aware that millets and horse gram constitute a novel diet to Travancoreans who have hitherto been accustomed to a purely rice diet. But in this national emergency every attempt has to be made to popularize the consumption of millets as a supplement to or in substitution of rice.' This way, Raju argued that there are no hard and fast rules about diet.

Reduction in the Consumption of Rice

Another subject I came across during this enquiry was the change in the food consumption pattern in the Keralam over the years. It was again Raju who drew my attention to the already changing food habits of the people in Keralam, which indicated the reduction in the consumption of rice in the State from the early 1990s. Nirmala (2015) and Khatkar et.al (2016) have also shown this tendency. I noticed myself that many new food varieties formerly absent in the State have appeared in the markets. Packed, tinned and ready-made food are new arrivals in Keralam. As a native I know that twenty or twenty-five years back, they were not found or very rarely found in the markets of Keralam. Even though this first appeared in the urban supermarkets, they were even available in the villages at the time of my fieldwork. Although there was a reluctance among many, especially the elder generation, to buy ready-made and instant food, now it has become a normalized part of everyone's daily life. For instance, it was a shame to buy milk in bags sold in the shops for those who were only used to drinking milk got directly by milking their own cows. But when dairies began to be unavailable, people started relying on the milk got in bags from the shops. Similarly, oats, cornflakes, bread, etc. have become regular food for many who are used to eating only homemade traditional food made from rice. Similarly, the increasing number of restaurants popping up in every nook and corner in the towns and even in the villages suggest a novel restaurant culture. A wide variety of food that is not made from rice is now available in the restaurants. As a native of Keralam and as a person from Kottayam town with relatives in the villages of Kuttanad, I myself have noticed these changes over the years.

Change in the food habits and reduction in the consumption of rice also exposes a change in the lifestyles of the people. Certainly, people eat what they like to eat and there is no obligation to eat rice. But at a deeper level, this inclination indicates the transformations happening locally as well as globally. The recent establishment of international food chains such as KFC and McDonald's in Keralam throws light at this transformation in the food habits and lifestyles of the traditionally rice eating population. At the same time, it also sheds light at the interest of

international entrepreneurs in the State of Kerala. Changes in the social, economic and cultural lives are also contributing to the transformation. Now mostly both husband and wife work and there is less time to cook food at home. Unlike when joint families existed and there was someone to cook food for all at home, now families are nuclear. Therefore, it is convenient to go to or buy parcels from restaurants and to buy tinned, packed and instant food available in the markets. All these changes undermine the need to produce rice. In the opinion of Gopakumar, a Malayalam lecturer from Mampuzhakari, whom I met in CMS College in Kottayam during one of my visits to the library there, it is in order to compensate for the decrease in the availability of rice that people turn to other food habits. However, in spite of all changes, I noticed that many people in Kerala still preferred rice as their main diet making the demand surge.

Problems connected with Import of Rice

Even though import of rice is considered a good solution to the problem of rice shortage, I understood that it has its own problems. It was when I discussed these issues with the different people I met in the different villages that I became aware of the complexities. According to my informants who were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians whom I met in Puthukari and Moncompu, external sources are not always reliable and there are numerous difficulties connected with the increasing dependence on imported rice. Not all these informants were from the agricultural community but still they showed concern about the the shortage of rice. During my further research, I came across a number of incidents that showed dependence on external sources making food security vulnerable in Kerala, which affirmed the statements of my informants.

When rice production in the other States of India also dwindled due to various reasons, the export of rice to Kerala would often abruptly stop, as they could not meet even their own rice demands. Sometimes, in such circumstances, smuggling of rice to Kerala takes place and the smuggled rice would be sold at exorbitant prices as written by Aravindakshan (1989). Another instance is, in times of natural calamities in Kerala, the State has no other way but to depend on other States and the Centre for rice. In such times, if these external sources are unable to supply rice for one reason or the other, the situation becomes extremely difficult. In such conditions also, the price of rice in the State soars as exposed by Aravindakshan (1989). Yet another instance is, when other States face natural calamities, the Centre prioritizes those States with foodgrains over Kerala thereby dwindling the supply. Kerala also suffers when the price of rice increases in India or in the world market.

The differences of opinion between the Centre and the State regarding the Centre's commitment to meet the food requirements of the State make the import also vulnerable to national policy. The problem is intensified when there are conflicting governments in the Centre and the State. Aravindakshan (1989: 25) quoted the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, who belonged to the Congress Party, reminding the Kerala Government of its own responsibility to produce foodgrains instead of depending on the Centre. The Prime Minister is reported to have asked why Kerala Government should go to Delhi with a 'begging bowl,' instead of producing its own requirements. The argument put up by the then State Government headed by Communist Chief Minister E.K. Nayanar in 1989 was that as the State was concentrating on foreign exchange earning cash crops, which brought valuable foreign exchange to the country, the Centre had the responsibility to feed its population. Government of India (1973: 11) confirms the contribution of the Kerala State to the national economy by way of cash crop export. Hence, the Centre-State relation is also a counting factor in the import of rice to Keralam.

This Rajiv Gandhi-E.K. Nayanar incident also exposes the importance given by the State government to profit and money over basic requirements like food, surprisingly even by the Communist Government. This calls attention to Balachandran's (2004) study. He wrote that in exchange for a few more dollars, developing nations deprive themselves of the food needs of their own people and jeopardize the physical and mental health of their people. He showed that during the boom in food exports in the 1970s, the major food exports from Keralam were cashew nuts and seafood. In the following period, the price of these food items soared so that the natives could no longer afford to buy high quality cashew nuts or the best seafood. This sheds light on the neglect of the basic needs of the people by both the Central and State governments while prioritizing other developments. The implementation of development projects in Kuttanad disregarding the ecology of the region and the inhabitants by the government in Keralam, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 4, must be viewed from this account.

Studies also show that even import of rice cannot resolve the deficit in Keralam. Rice is distributed in Keralam through the open market and through the Public Distribution System (PDS) where it is supplied at subsidized rates.²¹ Keralam depends entirely on the Centre for its

²¹ The origin of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India goes back to pre-independence days when food rationing was introduced in India at the start of the Second World War. After a quarter of a century, the PDS was introduced in India as part of the public policy on food security. In Keralam, the system was expanded during 1965 at a time when the State was undergoing an acute food shortage. Keralam contributes a big share in saving considerable foreign exchange to the national economy through the production of cash crops such as coconut, rubber, tea, coffee, spices, etc. The fact that even at the best of times, Keralam could not produce more than 50% of its foodgrain requirements was recognized by the central government which agreed to supply foodgrains (mainly rice and wheat) to meet the requirements of the PDS. This resulted in the establishment of a large network of ration shops throughout the State (Kannan 2000: 10-11).

annual requirement of foodgrains to maintain its PDS, and this makes the system even more vulnerable. The PDS covers 92% of the population in Kerala. Kannan (2000: 21) showed that the PDS is able to cover only two-thirds of the requirements of rice of the poor households, which again highlights the deficiency of rice in spite of imports. Thomas (2002:12) also noted that the quantity of rice and wheat distributed through PDS had declined drastically. The total amount of rice and wheat distributed through the PDS in 2000 were 0.614 million tonnes and 0.062 million tonnes respectively while the corresponding quantity during the year 1998 were 1.639 million tonnes and 0.458 million tonnes. According to him, allowing the widening gap between the domestic production and requirement of rice to be filled with growing imports from other States, by private persons or even through enhanced central allotments, poses a severe threat to the food security of the State's population.

Varghese (1995) showed that rice production was declining in the other States of India as well. Deepa's (2010) study also affirms this. According to her between 1990 and 2003, 1.5% of the agricultural land in India had been converted to non-agricultural purposes, which indicates the decreasing availability of rice. Varghese (1995) pointed out that enough rice is unavailable even in the world market. He noted that 96% of the rice produced in the world is consumed domestically in each rice producing country itself. Only the remaining 4% is exported. Hence, expecting to depend on external sources for the staple food, in the background of declining production of rice in the whole world is not a solution. In such a state of affairs, filling up available paddy fields or leaving them uncultivated and fallow in Kuttanad seemed regretful.

Why Should Kuttanad Produce Rice?

This predicament brings us back to the question 'Why should rice be grown in Kuttanad?' It was during my fieldwork in Chembumpuram, I met Josappan, a Syrian Christian landlord from the agricultural community. Among the different topics we discussed, I asked him the above question. He told me that the growth in population and the need to sustain India's top position as exporter of rice-based products, which is a good source of income for the nation increases the net demand for rice. This in turn necessitated the need to bring more land under rice cultivation in India. Khatkar et.al (2016) showed another reason. They stated that even though the consumption of foodgrains decreased in urban and rural India, the total foodgrain demand is projected to increase over the next fifty years due to increased demand for feed grain.

Apart from this national requirement, I realized that in spite of all changes and developments, the fact that rice is still the staple food of the people in Kerala, entailed the need to grow rice. I met Pappan, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer from the agricultural community while he was

levelling his paddy fields in Moncompu. While talking about rice deficiency, he said, 'It is imperative to achieve food security, if food self-sufficiency is not possible.' Kannan (2000: 7-8) had included the report of an Expert Committee of the Government of Kerala that examined this predicament that said, 'Self-sufficiency, in the sense of the State's ability to produce all the food items (especially rice) to meet its requirements, is not economically feasible in Kerala. Whereas, food security is possible in the State. Food security enables the State to ensure access to food to its population through a variety of means that include both enhancing production and its equitable distribution. Hence, internal production should ensure that decline in the national level production and movement restrictions does not affect the food security in the State, thus reducing the gap between internal production and the requirements of its population.' This brought to light the State's need to produce rice.

As I roamed around in the different villages meeting people, I raised the question whether it is possible to overcome the shortage of rice. Sixty-six informants from the agricultural community from the various villages I visited who were landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators and cultivator-labourers asserted that it is possible to produce more rice than what is produced now in Kerala, if all the uncultivated and barren fields are brought under cultivation. The 2005-2015 period is an example they upheld. My informants included *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians. I realized that this statement of hope gave optimism to many of my agricultural community informants.

In addition to this State requirement, paddy cultivation is the main and only occupation and livelihood of more than 80% of the population in Kuttanad. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Kuttanad region is 3.649 million. While writing about agriculture based distress in Kuttanad, emphasizing the need to protect and support the majority of the population in the region, Swaminathan (2007:8) stated that farming is the only source of income to more than 80% of the population, out of which 95% are small farmers with less than 0.4 hectare land. The majority of the inhabitants I met who were fully engaged in paddy cultivation knew no other occupation. 'We belong here. What are we going to do, if the paddy fields disappear?' asked Pachan, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Kumarakom. His house was located on a mud embankment protecting the paddy fields. Born and brought up in an agricultural family, he was one of the most dedicated paddy cultivators I met who knew the land and the water so thoroughly. Leaving their own land/home where they lived for generations, to settle down somewhere else was impractical and unthinkable for them. Even when the water reached their necks during the 2018 floods, I remember many of my informants refusing to get out of their houses when rescuers asked them to evacuate the place. It expressed their deep attachments to

their home and their land. Therefore, it is necessary for the agricultural community to protect the region as a rice producing tract, in order to live and to continue their traditional occupation and way of life, bringing attention to the local and regional necessity of producing rice.

Apart from the need for export, and the need to deal with the rice shortage and the survival of the agricultural community, most importantly, it is imperative to preserve the disappearing wetland ecosystem in order to maintain the ecological balance of the region, the State and the country. It was in Pulinkunnu I met Panikkar, a Nayar landlord-cultivator from the agricultural community during one of my strolls in the village. He was repairing the outer bunds of his fields while we discussed about the impact of land reclamations. Drawing attention to the agricultural community's role in the conservation of the region he asked, 'If we, the food producers don't protect the land which gives us food and life, who will do it?' Hence, in spite of all challenges, uncertainties and adversities, and despite a section of people trying to fill up the paddy fields, the agricultural community continue to produce rice in the remaining fields and struggle to conserve the region.

The New Land Reclamations and Environmental Degradation

The second major implication of the new land reclamations in the name of 'development', apart from the reduction in the area under paddy, waterbodies and wetlands and the shortage of rice is the environmental degradation of the wetland ecosystem, causing ecological imbalances. My enquiry into the environmental impact of land reclamations was done parallel to my investigations into the reduction in the area under paddy, waterbodies and wetlands. Together with personal observation and accounts of informants, I made use of secondary sources also to learn about the conditions in the region. The environmental degradation noticed in Kuttanad is a clash of the economic and the ecological as stated by Brosius (1999) and a clash of the local nature regime and the capitalist nature regime asserted by Biersack (2006).

Paddy Fields

Apart from the intensification of floods, which is a major consequence of the filling up of paddy fields, discussed in detail in chapter 4, the reclamation of paddy fields also adversely affected the drainage system. I observed that reclamation of paddy fields, mainly for the construction of roads, has made paddy cultivation in the neighbouring fields impossible as there is no space for the water to go out of the fields. James (2005) has also mentioned about this predicament. Where and when this happens, the owners of such paddy fields are forced to stop cultivation. They either leave their fields fallow or reclaim it for commercial purposes or sell it.

Waterbodies – Vembanad Kayal

My explorations gave me the understanding that encroachments into the rivers, canals and lakes, together with silting, clogging, dredging and sand mining was reducing the water carrying capacity of the waterbodies, thereby increasing the frequency and intensity of floods. The extensive developments in Keralam are adversely affecting the waterbodies. The Vembanad *Kayal* needs special mention in this regard, as it is a major source of livelihood, be it for paddy cultivation, fishing, tourism or any other occupation in the region. Extensive sand mining is adversely affecting the lake. During the course of my enquiry, I read a report of the Government of Kerala (2009: 6) testifying this predicament and stating that mining from the rivers, riverbanks and paddy lands caused not only unaccounted ecological losses but eventually would affect food and water security. It must be noted that sand mining is directly related to the construction industry, which is an integral part of the developments pursued in Keralam now. The report of the Government of Kerala also remarked that Kerala's construction boom may have its economic spin-offs, but could destroy its water and food resources irreversibly. Hence, according to the report this industry should be better regulated. However, I was able to learn that all attempts to regulate it through the district administration and police have not so far had any effect.

The Alappad sand mining strike that came up during my research period is a good example of the rising problem of sand mining in Keralam. The coastline between Chavara and Alappad in Kollam District of Keralam has decades-long story of people's battle for survival against mining companies. According to a report in *The News Minute* (January 2019), one after the other, the villages in the area are vanishing from the map of Keralam. A village named Panmana has turned into a heap of sand and an abandoned temple stands around where thousands of fishermen once lived. Extensive mineral beach sand mining has been happening in this coastal stretch since the 1960s by both public and private sand mining companies. Most of the people have been forced to leave their houses, even without any compensation from the authorities or the mining companies.

Another related activity that is bringing ecological damages in the Vembanad *Kayal* is lime shell collection. The lake has extensive resources of lime shell deposits. Construction materials using lime shells are rising in demand with the growing construction industry, which in turn is increasing the need for mining more lime shells from the lake as noted by Nair (1980: 8). This is resulting in the lake getting overexploited by private firms as well as government-run companies like the Travancore Cements Ltd., Travancore Electro-chemicals, Pallathara Bricks and Tiles, etc. Illicit collection of lime shells is also happening simultaneously as reported by

The New Indian Express (August 2014). Illicit collection and sale of lime shells were rampant even from the 1970s if not before, as can be understood from the account of Government of Kerala (1975). Narendran (2010) shed light upon the overexploitation of lime shell resources from the Vembanad *Kayal* by big companies using large dredgers, which he argues is adversely affecting the ecology of the region as well as the livelihood of the local people. According to him, such dredging operations prevent the growth of mollusc shells and the sludge released while washing the shells, which is deposited in the same area is increasing the pollution. The environmental impacts of anthropogenic activities related with land reclamations and encroachments does not stop here.

It was on one of those days when I was making inquiries into the impact of land reclamations and enroachments on the Vembanad *Kayal* that I visited Kumarakom. I was walking around near the lake in the village when I happened to meet a Nayar agricultural family who lived on the banks of the lake. When I mentioned the purpose of my visit and talked about my research, they took me to an evergreen stretch of mangroves on the eastern banks of the lake, close to their house. I grasped that it is the last relic of this tropical vegetation, which harbours a variety of endemic and exotic species of birds. Due to the development activities undertaken in and around the lake, the mangroves were already on the verge of extinction at the time of my fieldwork. Thus, through personal observation, accounts of my informants and with the help of secondary sources, I learned more about the impact of land reclamations and other developments on the waterbodies in Kuttanad.

Wetlands

Despite being a threat to the life and livelihood of the agricultural community who depend completely on the environment for survival and a hazard to the waterbodies, I realized that the reclamations are a danger also to the wetlands. Several studies have shown the richness of the Kuttanad wetland ecosystem. A study on floristic composition of Pathiramanal Island in Vembanad *Kayal* by Pradeep and Padmakumar (2003) showed that a small area of 68 hectares harbours a total of 118 species of indigenous vascular plants represented under 107 genera and 58 families. The observed high diversity in such a small area is indicative of the floral richness of the wetland. Narayanan and Sreekumar (2010)²² pointed out that the Kuttanad wetlands sustain a good number of migratory avian fauna comprising over 229 bird species belonging to 59 families. According to Padmakumar (2013: 68-69), an inventory of biodiversity in 110 holdings in Kuttanad wetland covering Alappuzha and Kottayam Districts taken up by the Regional Agricultural Research Station at Kumarakom in 2012 revealed 210 species of plants

²² Government Publication.

in this wetland as agricultural biodiversity components comprising endemic germplasm of banana, medicinal plants, spices, tuber crops and minor fruit plants. There were 28 genotypes of indigenous mango and several genotypes of jackfruit identified from this wetland as part of this study. In addition to this, six mango germplasm types that flower round the year were also reported. Similarly, famous local breeds of Kuttanadan ducks, Kuttanadan buffaloes, Vechur cows, Kuttanadan konchu,²³ Karimeen²⁴ and Kakka²⁵ are biodiversity icons of this wetland.

The rich wetland in Kuttanad is now part of the disappearing wetlands of the world. My query into the matter exposed how wetland diminution due to development activities is leading to ecological imbalances in the State. Apart from the statements of my informants, I had to rely on secondary sources to study the issue. I stumbled upon quite a number of studies that disclose this reality. Paithalen (2005) wrote about the disappearance of the wetlands due to illegal land reclamations using the earth got by clearing the hilly regions of Keralam. He showed that with the disappearance of wetlands, floods increase in Keralam and asserted that the sudden floods that happened in Keralam in the years 1992, 1994 and 1997 were examples. He pointed out that what was disappearing with the ‘irrational’ developments in Keralam in favour of private corporate interests for building hospitals and shopping malls were the valuable wetlands in the State. He pointed out that the government was taking a neutral stand in favour of the rich. He argued that misconceptions about developments were leading to environmental destruction in Keralam. Five years later, Narendran (2010) wrote that if ‘developments’ continued like this, the internationally renowned wetlands of Kuttanad would disappear within fifty years.

Ten years after Paithalen (2005) made his study, Abraham (2015) noted that because of developmental activities, the hills and the wetlands in Keralam are under threat more than any other part of the country. She wrote that the soil extracted from levelling the hillocks was used for reclaiming the wetlands. She noted that this phenomenon is partly due to the local disregard of the wetlands and hills as wastelands. She stated that unauthorized encroachment of wetland for development purposes are continuing in the State, especially in areas adjacent to lowland paddy fields, mangroves and other backwater areas. These indiscriminate activities, she argued, would have a serious negative impact on the entire ecological system. She pointed out that irrational land use and agricultural practices in the wetland areas along with forest clearing in highlands exert pressure on land leading to soil erosion. This causes siltation leading to vertical shrinkage and related problems like salinity intrusion, ecosystem change and biodiversity loss. Apart from these studies, Swaminathan (2007) and Jayan and Sathyanathan (2010) have also

²³ *Macrobrachium rosenbergi*.

²⁴ *Etiopis suratensis*.

²⁵ *Villorita cyprinoides*.

provided similar confirmations of wetland degradation due to development activities. These studies point at the severity of the problems created by the new land reclamations I observed during my fieldwork. The ethnographic data on the impact of land reclamations mentioned above exposes the adverse effects of the efforts of the government and the people belonging to the different castes and communities in bringing alterations on the ecologically fragile stretch of land lying below sea level, disregarding the ecology of the region in order to bring changes in the social stratifications.

Environment Conservation Laws

The reduction in the area under paddy, waterbodies and wetlands, the shortage of rice and the increasing adverse effects of the new developments on the environment, making the region an increasingly uninhabitable space, united the agricultural community in opposing 'developments' -- especially the new land reclamation activities. I now turn to the environmental conservation laws in the region, which are against land reclamations and which are the results of the struggles of the agricultural community.²⁶

I was at a teashop in Kavalam talking about the spread of Communism in Kuttanad with some of my informants. From the conversation that materialized, I grasped that the agricultural community started their struggle with the help of the agricultural labour union of the Communist Party of the India (Marxist) - CPI (M). As it was extremely inappropriate to ask people's castes in such groups, I did not ask my informants their caste on this occasion. Raman was an agricultural labourer who was present there. He told me that even though the campaign began with party assistance, it is only the agricultural community and a very few others who were genuine in the resistance for the protection of the region. The interests and intentions of the parties changed and shifted with power. However, whatever be the interests/intentions of the various factions that constituted the resistance movement against land reclamations, the movement bore fruit with the implementation of environment conservation laws like the Kerala Land Utilization Order (1967) and the Kerala Conservation of Paddy and Wetland Act (2008). My visits to the government offices in the different villages of Kuttanad helped me to collect data regarding the conservation laws, and my talks with inhabitants, bureaucrats and politicians from the Indian National Congress, Kerala Congress and Communist Party of India (Marist) gave me a good grasp of these laws in the region. Now I shall explain these laws.

²⁶ As I am detailing the resistance movement of the agricultural community in Chapter 9, I am reserving the discussion for later.

Kerala Land Utilization Order of 1967 (KLUO)

The KLUO of 1967 was framed at a time when India was facing foodgrain deficits. The Order vested District Collectors with powers to enforce food crop cultivation. According to the Order, if the government sees that there is need to increase food production in any particular area (which in the opinion of my informants from the agricultural community, the government never sees), then by a gazette notification, the District Collector can direct the holders of the land to cultivate their land with paddy or any particular crop for a specific period of time. After such a notification, if the holder of a land still does not start cultivation, then the District Collector is empowered to either auction off that land or cultivate that land for a certain period of time. According to my cultivator informants, this clause only exists on paper. The Order further states that if the holder of the land was cultivating a particular kind of crop for a continuous period of three years, then the same crop shall be cultivated on that land in the coming years and no attempts to grow or cultivate any other kind of crop shall be made by the holder of the land. The cultivators however left the fields barren. The Order further says that after any sale or auction, if the new purchaser fails to cultivate the land, then the District Collector is empowered to terminate the rights of the new purchaser. The District Collector can further take steps to arrange for cultivation of the land.

Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act of 2008

KLUO concerns only land use and not conservation or protection. As a result, uncontrolled land reclamation activities went on until 2008. Available records show tremendous reduction in the area under paddy and waterbodies between the years 1967 and 2008. I read a report of The Punja Special Officer (1982)²⁷ which stated that though there is a government order as early as 1967 prohibiting the filling up of paddy lands, it appears that the order is not being enforced, since large areas of paddy land are seen being filled up even years after the order is placed. This government report is proof of the land reclamations that were carried out even after the KLUO was implemented. Indeed, it was because of the ineffectiveness of the KLUO of 1967 that the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act had to be formulated in 2008. The objective of this new Act was to conserve paddy land and wetland, and to strictly restrict the conversion or reclamation of such land. The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act (2008) prevented landholders from converting wetland to other uses. Even if the land is sold, it should remain as a wetland and cannot be used for anything other than rice cultivation. However, as my research proceeded, I got to know that even the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act (2008) is not effective. I shall explain what I learned as my research progressed.

²⁷ Government Publication.

Illegal Land Reclamations

In spite of all Laws, Acts and Orders for which the punishment for violation is imprisonment and fine, nobody is imprisoned or fined in Kuttanad or in Keralam and land continues to be reclaimed for various purposes either illegally or by using loopholes in these Laws. Sometimes this is done even with the support of the government, as I shall show now. Illegal land reclamations is a significant reason why the area under paddy is decreasing despite the increase in the number of absentee landlords leasing out land for cultivation and efforts to bring in fallow lands back to cultivation. James (2005) wrote about the illegal land reclamations in the Pathanamthitta District of Kuttanad region. He stated that illegal land reclamations from 0.04 hectare to 40.46 hectares were done by hundreds of trucks working during nighttime to avert attention of the public. He pointed out that it was the earth from the hills that was brought to fill up the paddy fields and the wetland. He asserted that illegal land reclamations were done with the support of the government and political parties not just by big real-estate lobbies but also by those engaged in agriculture. Similarly, I came across a number of other studies and reports also about illegal land reclamations in the Kuttanad region like John (2004), Swaminathan (2007: 9), Biminith (2008), Ravivarma (2010), Abraham (2015) and Nair and Dhanuraj (2016: 6).

It has to be emphasized that people belonging to different castes and communities are involved in these illegal land reclamations pointing to the fact that it is not the interest of any one particular caste or community but that it is done irrespective of such divisions. It highlights the point that people irrespective of castes and communities desired to benefit from the transformation of the physical landscapes. Often this is done by persons belonging to different castes and communities with individual interests. I visited many local government offices in Moncompu, Thakazhi, Karumadi etc. to collect information on land reclamations but I was not provided with any data regarding reclamations. None of the bureaucrats or politicians I met were ready to disclose any information regarding land reclamations. They just said that reclamations are now prohibited by law. However, the records I collected from elsewhere and the different cases that became public at various periods are enough proof of the illegal reclamations still going on.

Cases of Illegal Land Reclamations

I would like to mention three cases of illegal land reclamations that happened in Kuttanad disregarding the ecology of the region with the support of the government and politicians. These three cases are sheer evidence of the government's backing of non-agricultural developments

in the region, forfeiting the environment, much against the aspirations of the agricultural community. These cases expose the lack of recognition of a globally renowned and protected landscape like Kuttanad wetlands by the government and the capitalist entrepreneurs. These cases expose the depth of the predicament related with reclamations and the corruption involved in the whole system.

Methran *Kayal* Case

The Methran *Kayal* case happened before my fieldwork began and so the data is mainly from newspaper reports and also recollections of my informants. The Travancore King gave a reclaimed land which had an extend of 168.75 hectares to the Devalokam Bishop in Kottayam to do paddy cultivation. Thereafter this reclaimed land came to be known as Methran *Kayal*. Methran means Bishop in Malayalam. Later on, the *kayal* came under the ownership of different members of the Devalokam Church. Nirmala (2010) noted that Rakindo Developers bought the Methran *Kayal* where paddy and pisciculture were intermittently cultivated from these owners to convert it into a tourism project namely Rakindo Kumarakom Resorts Pvt. Ltd. that included a golf club worth Rupees 30,000 million (375,435,000 Euro).

Rakindo is a Chennai based building company of hotels and resorts that has international projects in India, China, Europe and the Middle East. Their project in the Methran *Kayal* was in partnership with Trimex, a known mining group and traders in unrefined raw materials and the local Pattara group. Nirmala stated that given the fact that Kuttanad being an area in Keralam where lime shells are available in great quantity, the involvement of mining companies like Trimex created suspicions. The company had also asked permission from the government for mining and dredging in the Vembanad *Kayal*. It must be noted that according to the report of the Mining Department of the Government of India published on 7 December 2009, Keralam occupied the 17th position in illegal mining. Thirty-seven out of the thirty-nine owners sold their properties in Methran *Kayal* to Rakindo. Nirmala showed that Rakindo bought the properties giving 30 to 50 lakh Rupees (37,650 to 62,750 Euro) per acre to the owners. She reported that in order to evade the ceiling limit of the land reforms, the properties were registered in the name of different companies. But two remaining owners who owned 8.09 hectares (20 acres) together wanted to do cultivation.

Rakindo submitted their application for approval before the CPI (M) Government headed by Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanathan in September 2009. Conflicts were reported within the government whether to approve it or not. The conflicts for and against the project within the Communist Government shows that some within the Communist Party supported land

reclamations. It has to be emphasized that it was in 2007 that the Swaminathan Commission had submitted his report showing the importance of protecting the region for paddy cultivation to survive. The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act had come into effect in 2008. The Rakindo's submission of the application after all this is a paradox.

The fact that this happened in Kumarakom, which is a stronghold of the CPI (M) and the agricultural labourer unions means that it is not impossible for the capitalist entrepreneurs to undertake similar projects adversely affecting paddy cultivation in the other regions of Kuttanad/Keralam. Deshabhimani (June 2010) reported that as the Methran *Kayal* was left uncultivated for years due to this case, the agricultural labourers and the local people lost work of about Rupees 5 million (62,750 Euro). If cultivation was done, they could have produced an average of 10,000 quintals rice and the fishermen could have caught 250 tonnes of fish from the *padashekham*. However, resistance swelled up against the project. Organizations like Kerala Karshaka Thozhilali Union, Kerala Matsya Thozhilali Ikyu Vedi and even members of the CPI (M) resisted the deal until it was halted. In 2016, paddy cultivation was resumed in some fields in the Methran *Kayal*. As the case is still in court, and as most of the fields are owned by Rakindo, many fields still remain uncultivated.

An analysis of this case shows that even though the development project was brought by non-inhabitant entrepreneurs from outside Kuttanad, thirty-seven out of the thirty-nine owners sold their properties in Methran *Kayal* to them, when they were offered good money. This point at the importance given to money over paddy cultivation by these inhabitants. The Methran *Kayal* case is a good example of the government's support for private investments in the region with the hope that it would bring further development of the land area, which would help the enhancement of capital. However, this done by sacrificing the ecology of the region pointing to the lack of concern of the government for the ecology of the region and its inhabitants.

Aranmula Case

The second case is related with an airport in Aranmula. This also happened before my fieldwork began. Aranmula International Airport Project was a famous effort developed by the Anil Ambani-backed KGS Group to build a private airport at Aranmula in Kuttanad region. Anil Ambani is an Indian business magnate. He is the chairman of Reliance Group which came into existence in June 2005. He leads a large number of stock listed corporations including Reliance Capital, Reliance Infrastructure, Reliance Power and Reliance Communications. The aerotropolis at Aranmula was to be developed along with a special economic zone, multi-specialty hospital, shopping mall, star hotels and an international school. Aranmula is a heritage

site identified by the United Nations Development Programme. It was the CPI (M) Government under Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan that had in principle provided the approval for the airport in 2009 on the condition that the promoters procure sufficient land on their own. The Central Government also gave sanction for the proposal in 2012 when the Indian National Congress was in power in Kerala with Oommen Chandy as Chief Minister. However, there were allegations that permission was obtained by violating rules. The District Collector had given a report to the State Government listing the many violations committed by the airport's private promoter group.

The project was estimated to be completed within eighteen months at a cost of Rupees 20 billion (247,809,350 Euro). The airport was proposed to be built on about 283.27 hectares (700 acres) of land. An executive summary of the project including the anticipated environmental impact was prepared by Chennai-based Enviro Care India Pvt. Ltd. and was submitted to the Government of India. However, the Environmental clearance for the project was not granted. The proposed project necessitated conversion of a vast expanse of the Aranmula *punja* land and wetland, which would ultimately lead to drying up of river Pampa flowing through the Kuttanad region. The Kerala State Biodiversity Board (KSBB) warned that the conversion of paddy fields and water bodies for the construction of the airport would lead to water scarcity as well as flooding in the neighbouring areas.

The project became controversial and faced strong protest from environmental groups like the Thriuvarammula Paithruka Grama Karma Samiti, Prakruthi Samrakshana Samyukta Vedi, etc. and from the opposition parties in Kerala right from its initial stages. Environmentalists led by Sugathakumari, the well-known poet in Kerala who is a native of Aranmula opposed it holding that the airport's construction would adversely affect the ecology of the area and that there was no need for an airport at Aranmula in a small state like Kerala that already has four other airports. Allegations of discrepancies in awarding clearances increased the project's controversies. Thomas Peelianickal, the then Chairman of Kuttanad Development Council, has been reported to have said that it was strange to watch the 'wicked' ways in which the Centre was making attempts to violate various important laws of a State and that too to protect the interests of a private company. The KSBB submitted a report to the government in March 2013, expressing its reservations over 'the land use changes and ecological imbalance that the project will entail.' On 2 April 2013, National Green Tribunal Act granted an interim stay on the project banning any construction. It also stayed the Kerala Government's order to convert the 283.27 hectares (700 acres) of land for industrial purpose until further orders. Even though the airport project was given environmental clearance by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in New

Delhi on 19 November 2013, the National Green Tribunal cancelled the environmental clearance on 28 May 2014. The promoters failed to overturn this order in the Supreme Court of India, which led to the abandonment of the project. Following that, the Government of India withdrew its sanction for the Airport. This led to the termination of the project and is now totally discarded since 2014 as reported by The Hindu (February 2013).

This case exposes the involvement of both the UDF and the LDF in this case. Even though it was the Indian National Congress Government that moved forward with the construction of the airport, it is quite surprising that the proposal for the international airport was first approved by the CPI (M) Government. The LDF Government approved it in 2009, that is, two years after Swaminathan submitted his report in 2007 emphasizing the need to protect the paddy fields and the wetland and a year after the Kerala Conservation of Paddy and Wetland Act was passed in 2008. The Aranmula case is a good example of the government's (UDF and LDF) support of infrastructural developments with the help of private capital and its encouragement to private investments in the region. Moreover, this is a clear proof of the involvement of government in profit oriented non-agricultural developments, adversely affecting the environment of the region.

Thomas Chandy Case

The third case is related with the former Transport Minister Thomas Chandy. As it irrupted at the time of my fieldwork in 2017, I was able to observe the reactions and feedbacks connected with it. There was great excitement and enthusiasm among the inhabitants when the news confirming illegal land reclamations by Thomas Chandy, violating the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act of 2008 was published in the mass media in October-November 2017. It was Asianet, a Malayalam news channel in Keralam that had exposed the illegal land reclamations done by the Minister for his luxury resort named Lake Palace in Alappuzha. It was Alappuzha District Collector T. V. Anupama who probed the alleged land encroachment by the Minister. During the probe, the Collector's team compared old satellite images with more recent ones. The encroachment by Thomas Chandy's resort was thereby confirmed. The Collector reported that a huge stretch of Marthandam Lake was filled with mud to build the resort and its adjoining parking area. A paddy field was also filled up to build a private road leading to the resort.

The Collector's report confirmed that the Minister received ample support from bureaucrats and politicians in his realty deals in Kuttanad, which were sometimes drawn from public funds. Based on the Collector's report, the television channels reported that the Transport Minister

initiated the construction of the Valiyakulam-Zero Jetty Road because it effectively led to his Lake Palace Resort. His plan was to make the government pay for a road to his resort by the lake. Thomas Chandy and the then Alappuzha MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), A.A. Shukkoor recommended the road. The Alappuzha Municipality took over the project. Rajya Sabha Members K.E Ismail and P.J. Kurien released their local area development funds for the construction of the road. Ismail released the fund with the consent from the CPI district committee. The reports also stated that the Ports and Fisheries Departments too allocated funds for the project during the term of the previous Indian National Congress Government, which brought the UDF also into the case. And finally, the harbour engineering department had built the road.

I was in Puthukari when the news spread and it was a topic of heated discussion among everyone. Almost all the houses in the village had their television sets turned on to learn more about the incident. I was part of a heated discussion about the case in a teashop in the village. Monichan, a landlord-cultivator from Puthukari and Raghunathan, another landlord-cultivator from the village pointed out to me that I must note that this case came up while the LDF is in power and that this is done by a present minister in the government with the help of other politicians and bureaucrats – a case of high corruption!

As I moved to other parts of Kuttanad later, I came across the reactions of others like Gayathri, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Kavalam and Georgekutty, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Mampuzhakari.²⁸ I met them in the paddy fields in the villages while they were engaged in their routine activities related with cultivation. The moment they saw me, they started talking about this case. They called my attention to the fact that this incident of illegal land reclamation by a LDF minister came up after the passing of the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act in 2008, which was a great initiative of the Left Government. They noted it as a paradox because it is the Communists who often act as protectors of the paddy fields of Kuttanad. Thomas Chandy had contested from Kuttanad on NCP (National Congress Party) ticket representing Kuttanad constituency in the Assembly.

I visited Champakulam also during the time of this case where I was able to observe and meet many inhabitants. Thommachan, a Syrian Christian grocery shop owner was one among them. I visited his shop in the pretext of buying something and brought up the Chandy case for discussion. While dealing with his customers and talking to me at the same time, he commended loudly that nothing more can be expected from a government from which already two other

²⁸ Gayathri is a female agricultural labourer and Georgekutty is a male landlord-cultivator.

ministers had to resign from the cabinet due to corruption cases within one year of governance. Even though Thomas Chandy later took the case to higher courts and denied the charges against him, he ultimately had to resign from the government, as Collector Anupama's findings were found legitimate, confirming Chandy's illegal encroachment.

All my informants from the agricultural community whom I met during this period in the various villages who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians rejoiced hearing the news of the Minister's resignation. They raised their concern about the plight of Kuttanad being led by leaders like Thomas Chandy. Johnychan is a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator I met in Champakulam during this time. He said, 'After all, Thomas Chandy is a businessman turned politician. Profit and business is in his blood.' Until his resignation, Thomas Chandy was the richest legislator in Kerala. Eighty-five people I met in the different villages and towns separately on various occasions who belonged to both agricultural and non-agricultural communities who were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmanamar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians told me that Thomas Chandy is just one among the many others who are encroaching land. Unfortunately for Chandy, he got caught while many others go free. Josekutty, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Champakulam, Raman Unni, a Nayar landlord-cultivator from Chennankari, Radha, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Pulinkunnu and sixteen others from the agricultural community in Kannadi and Karumadi told me that officers like the District Collector Anupama must take up office in Kuttanad to save the region.²⁹

The Chandy case had an immediate impact on my field research. For example, my visits to the government offices in the region were almost futile after the Thomas Chandy case. None of the region's officers and bureaucrats were ready to talk to me about anything regarding the case or to give me any records related with land and infrastructural constructions in the region. All of them were very reluctant to answer the different questions I posed related with land reclamations and 'developments'. Most of them were very adamant in their answer indicating that there are no illegal land reclamations after the passing of the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act in 2008, adding that Thomas Chandy's case is the only exception. However, sixteen officers I met in the villages of Moncompu, Pulinkunnu, Thakazi and Karumadi who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Latin Catholics said that they cannot give any records but there are still a lot of illegal land reclamations going on. Those who agreed about illegal reclamations requested me not to mention this or their names in what I am writing.

²⁹ Radha is a female agricultural labourer.

I had the same experience as I had in the government offices when I visited those engaged in tourism related activities in the resorts and homestays in the region. The majority treated me with great suspicion when I told them that I am a researcher. Some began to interrogate me, even though I never asked any direct questions like whether they had reclaimed land illegally.

I had the opportunity to meet a number of politicians from the UDF and the BJP at that time and they blamed the LDF for all land encroachments in the region. I met them separately or in small groups of four or five in party offices or elsewhere in the different villages. One of them from the UDF even called the LDF government 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'. However, I felt certain that they were only making use of the opportunity to place all the blame on the LDF, covering up their own cases of corruptions. I also met a number of politicians from the LDF both separately and in groups of four or five informants in their party offices or elsewhere in the villages who were rather silent over everything concerning the case. From my conversations with them, they stressed the point that the entire party and the government cannot be blamed for the wrong done by one of them. Six of them from the LDF said that the government cannot be blamed because once the government realized that Chandy had done wrong, he was made to resign. However, Nanu Ashan, a Nayar teacher who is my uncle's friend from Chennankari, whom I met in his house during this period, pointed out that even though Chandy was the richest Minister in the Assembly and the government benefited a lot from him, they could not retain him anymore because they had to think of the coming elections.

Undoubtedly, the case pointed at the incidence of high corruption in Kerala politics. This incident of reclamation which put immense pressure on and completely shook the Left Government in Keralam and ultimately led to the resignation of the wealthiest Minister in the Assembly designates the magnitude of the problem of illegal land reclamations and encroachments in Kuttanad. Illegal land reclamations and encroachments still continue. Some of them get caught, while others go free without anyone noticing or on the basis of bribes and corruption. The Thomas Chandy case also exposes the government's (illegitimate) backing of private investments for filling up the paddy field, waterbodies and wetlands of Kuttanad in the name of 'development'.



Photo 4. Aerial view of Lake Palace Resort in Alappuzha owned by ex-Minister Thomas Chandy.

Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act 2018

It was at a time when I was occupied with people's reactions towards and experiences related with conservation laws and illegal land reclamations in the field that there suddenly came up an amendment to the 2008 Conservation Act in 2018. It was again the LDF Government under Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan that brought the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act 2018 amending the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetlands Act 2008. I partly relied on my informants' accounts and partly on newspaper reports to gather information regarding this amendment.

The Act provided permission for reclaiming paddy fields for major industrial and infrastructure projects as well as regularizing fields filled and recorded as paddy fields in revenue records before 2008, the year in which the original Act came into effect. These lands could be used for other purposes subject to conditions. It enables easier land acquisition for big government projects. The amendment allows small landholders to build houses or shops on 5-10 cents (0.020-0.040 hectare) of unnotified land (land excluded in the draft data bank and levelled before 2008). If the land is larger than 10 cents (0.040 hectare), specific conditions have been laid for regularization. If the land is above 50 cents (0.20 hectare), 10% should be set apart for water conservation. Legalization of paddy land reclamation can be regularized only if it does not disturb the water flow and does not affect the paddy fields nearby. The new Act also provides for regularization of wetland reclaimed before the Land Reforms Act of 1967. Wetland filled between 1967 and 2008 could be regularized by imposing a fee of about 50% of the fair value of the land.

The Times of India (June 2018) reported that according to CPI (M) Revenue Minister E. Chandrasekharan, the amendment Act of 2018 is a legislation meant for the 'common good' of the State. According to him, land acquisition for infrastructure development projects is a challenge faced by the State. As said by him, the amendment was introduced because several government projects like GAIL (Gas Authority of India Limited) pipelining was stalled because of the provisions of the 2008 Conservation Act. In his view, the State should avoid situations in which it loses mega projects like the GAIL pipelaying for want of land. Summing up the objectives behind the legislation, he said it was an attempt to balance the need to conserve the remaining paddy fields in the State with the compulsions to provide housing for the homeless and spur the economic development of the State. This upheld the LDF Government's development aspirations. The UDF, the opposition, vigorously protested the amendments alleging that it would destroy the remaining paddy and wetlands and would pave the way for corruption, rampant filling of paddy fields and degradation of the environment. However, it did not have much impact. The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act 2018 is the best example of the compromise among 'stakeholders' noted by Brosius (1999).

It was a great setback to the agricultural community and their various efforts to protect the environment and paddy cultivation. Many I met in the villages could not believe that it was the Communist Government that brought the new amendment. Politicians I met during this time in Mithrakari belonging to the Indian National Congress told me that this Amendment is the best proof of the fact that it is not the Congress but the Communists who are bringing policies that are destructive to the environment and paddy cultivation. The politicians from the Communist Party I met in Ramankari and Puthukari on the other hand told me that the Government would not do anything against the environment, paddy cultivation and the people. They affirmed that what it brings would be for the 'common good'. As I made my regular visits to the paddy fields in Kannadi I met Kutty, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer who was spraying chemical pesticides in his field. As we talked about the amendment he said, 'If it is not the Communists, then it would have been the Congress who would have brought such an amendment.' Overall, I realized that the Amendment Act 2018 was a great disappointment for the agricultural community and those who stood for conserving the environment and paddy cultivation in Kuttanad. It seemed as if the government was making loopholes to carry on their development agendas in the region. This sheds light at the assertions made by Harvey (2003) regarding the role of the government in the process of capitalist expansion.



Photos 5 and 6. Trucks carrying earth brought from outside Kuttanad to fill up paddy fields in Kuttanad.

Transformation of the Landscapes

Both the government and the people are equally involved in the process of land reclamations and the transformation of the region. The rate of alterations made on the landscape are so drastic and rapid that the ‘social construction’ of the landscape was clearly visible at the time of my fieldwork. The rapid transformations happening around created anxieties and insecurities among the inhabitants about an uncertain future. The environmental problems they saw before them raised suspicions but promises of development projects extended were making them at the same time envision a better future. The changes are new and appealing, but hesitations and doubts linger. There was hope and hopelessness. In the course of my fieldwork, I realized that the new land reclamations were filling up not just the paddy fields, waterbodies and the wetlands, but also the inhabitants’ memories that linked them to the region and its past. The myths and folklore related with each and every part of the landscape that connected them to the region were getting erased. The ‘face’ of Kuttanad was getting transformed. This was altering the reputation of the region as the ‘Rice-bowl of Keralam’ and the ‘Granary of Keralam’. It also points at the transformation of the identity of the region and its inhabitants. The old structures are demolished and new structures are being created.

This chapter exposes the manner in which both the people and the government alter and shape the physical landscapes of Kuttanad to suit their wider social, economic and political interests. If the intention of the people is to bring changes in the social stratifications, the object of the government is to pave the way for capitalism to enhance capital. The changes in the land utilization exposed in this chapter embodies the people and their aspirations as explained by Rodman (1992), Feld and Basso (1996) and Joniak-Luthi (2015). By shaping and reshaping the

landscapes, they are actually moulding and remoulding their own identities. The changed landscapes sheds light at the different ways people relate to the landscapes and find meanings in it as Tuan (1975) puts it and the resultant commodification of land and contest over resources as explicated by Ingold (2000). The physical transformation of Kuttanad and the environmental imbalances shed light at Scott (1998) and Harvey (2003). The creations and constructions done without regard for the environment, local knowledge and local variations point at the high modernist development endeavours about which Scott (1998) wrote. Even though Scott's analysis was centered on the State, Kuttanad exposes abstract, top down modernist undertakings driven by the capitalist market economy. The spatial reorganization indicates the geographical expansion of capitalism as noted by Harvey (2003). It depicts the structural, institutional and legal changes a region undergoes when it is brought into the logic of capitalist development and the role of the government in the whole process.

The chapter also demonstrates how capitalism amasses wealth without rationalizing labour and raw materials, but by acts of translation across varied social and political spaces, in the way Tsing (2015) explained and analyzed as salvage economy. The changes made on the landscapes could be seen as a result of the meeting of two lifeworlds, as stated by Brosius (1999), Biersack (2006) and Tsing (2015). It reveals the encounter between the ecological and economic and demonstrates the tension that is between an ecology embedded in society and an ecology that operates independently of socio-moral considerations. The exaggerated development undertakings, plans and constructions – which are often not creating any new production in the region - bring attention to the symbolic and ritualized manner in which people react and respond to developments, as shown by Tsing (1993).

Conclusion

This chapter exemplifies the human induced alterations on the landscape of Kuttanad since its creation, in accordance with the changing political ecology in Keralam, India and the rest of the world. Drawing attention to the two major physical transformations through land reclamations, light is shed on the moulding and remoulding of a region to suit larger social, economic and political interests. The repercussions of such alterations on the environment and the inhabitants are exposed, revealing the ways they bear the consequences and adjust to the new changes. Illegal land reclamations and amendments to the conservation laws in favour of land reclamations indicate ascendancy of certain factions at the cost of the environment and its inhabitants. Having comprehended the physical transformation of Kuttanad, next, I would like to draw attention to the second major problem in the region, which is also a key consequence

of the land reclamations, that is, floods. The next chapter thus delves into floods and the human efforts to deal with the problem.

Part I
Chapter 4
Floods

Together with land reclamations, the second major issue that has severe implications on the Kuttanad region is floods. Chapter 4 deals with the occurrence of floods and the human efforts to tackle it. This chapter exposes the various technological and infrastructural developments undertaken in the region by the government to prevent and control floods, to increase profit from paddy and to attract investments for further development of the region. The chapter illustrates the alterations made on physical landscapes by the government in the name of ‘development’ and its adverse effects on the inhabitants and the environment. I begin with a description of the condition of floods in the region. The ‘creation’ of Kuttanad benefited many generations by means of employment, income, settlement, sustenance, etc., from the time of its creation until now. However, save the benefits, they have to live under the constant threat of floods throughout their life. In my research into the flood situation in Kuttanad, I came across various historical sources as well as recent studies that have written about the condition in the region in times of floods, in which the inhabitants have been living from very early times. The studies include Ward and Conner (1893),³⁰ Government of Kerala (1963), Pillai and Panikkar (1965), Government of Kerala (1989), Padmanabhan et.al (2001), Balachandran et.al (2002) and Balachandran (2004) to name a few. These sources provided me a deep insight into the difficult life conditions created by floods in the region. Apart from these sources, being a native of the region, I myself have witnessed and experienced the conditions created by floods.

Doing cultivation below sea level, where the ecology is extremely delicate and exceedingly vulnerable to floods is a high risk people take each time they produce food. The intensity of floods depends on the intensity of rains in the Western Ghats that flood the four rivers Pampa, Achenkoil, Manimala and Meenachil that flow into the region. In spite of having the knowledge and skill passed down from generations, of the unique technique of farming under such tenuous conditions, the only thing people could do when the forces of nature descended on them was to completely surrender themselves before the power of nature, and watch their land and fields get destroyed right in front of their eyes. ‘Generations of experiences with the forces of nature have made the agricultural community wise to know how far human beings can meddle with nature,’ said Pappachan, a Nayar landlord-cultivator from Champakulam whom I found actively engaged in cultivation activities during my fieldwork in the village. In his opinion, the new

³⁰ Government Publication.

interventions are done without this wisdom. I observed and realized that even though floods recurred frequently, the optimistic inhabitants never gave up their traditional occupation. Making the best out of floods, they continue to cultivate food.

Floods – A Normal Phenomenon

It was during a flood season that I visited Chennankari. All the fields there were lying under water. Ummachan, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator in the village is a family friend. Looking out at the heavy rain from the window of his traditional house, he said that floods are an annual feature during the rainy seasons, essential to the region's ecology as a natural cleanser, at the same time helping to replenish the fertility of the region. Hence, according to him, a regular flood is a blessing to this region. Like Ummachan, forty-eight informants from the agricultural community I met in the villages of Champakulam, Moncompu, Ramankari and Mithrakari who were from the different castes and communities in the region told me that floods have become a normal part of their life and that they have become used to the phenomenon. Government of Kerala (1963), Nair (1980) and Aiya (1999: 23)³¹ have also written about floods as a normalized occurrence in Kuttanad and have pointed out the benefits from inundation. However, even though people spoke about all the benefits floods brought to the region, almost all of them agreed that a flood is never a pleasant occurrence. They found it miserable and unwelcome. Nevertheless, they had to live with it.



Photo 7. Image of floods.

Historic data suggest that floods in Kuttanad have a return period of 2, 5, 10, 25, and 50 years. Floods with a return period of 10 years and above are severe, whereas the regular floods with return period of 5 years and less are less severe. Floods that occurred in 1986 had a return period of 10 years and flooded the entire wetland. The first devastating flood that affected the entire

³¹ Government Publication.

State was in 1924. Afterwards the year 1961 witnessed heavy floods. Since then heavy floods were recorded in the years of 1968, 1975, 1981, 1986, and 1992. Limited floods affecting Kuttanad area also occurred in the years of 1964, 1971, 1978, 1985, 1989, 1994, 1996, 1997 and 1998. After the 1924 flood, the worst flood in the century happened towards the end of my PhD period in August 2018 and had a great impact on my study area. I have incorporated the details of this flood as an epilogue. In the 2009 floods, 10,553 persons including 2,134 children had to be evacuated from the region. In 2008, six incidents of floods occurred within a period of three months. Prior to that, in July 2007 also Kuttanad witnessed a massive flood. Around 134,000 people were evacuated from the Alappuzha District during the 2007 floods. Raghunathan, a Nayar landlord-cultivator from Puthukari is a family friend I came into contact with during my fieldwork. We were talking about the adverse effects of developments in the region and the floods. Indicating the capitalist motive behind the making of the region and its adverse effects, he laughed and said, “The creation of Kuttanad in the early 19th century was a ‘development’ at that time. However, we still live with the consequences of that development.” The creation of Kuttanad through land reclamation and the cultivation of paddy show the taming of nature by human beings. At the same time, the occurrence of floods indicate the humans having to adjust to the consequences of their own actions.

Infrastructural and Technological Developments in Kuttanad

Sipping his hot milk tea and looking out from his house at the heavy rain Ummachan, the Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator I met in Chennankari said, ‘Considering the geographical location of Kuttanad, it is not possible to save this region completely from floods.’ Paradoxically, my research revealed that almost all the major development initiatives undertaken in the region by the government were to prevent and control these naturally occurring floods and to increase paddy production. In the course of my fieldwork, I came across a number of infrastructural and technological developments brought by the different democratically elected governments to prevent and control floods, to increase the profit from paddy production and to attract investments for further development of the region in order to enhance capital. The predicament is that all these development projects failed to fulfill their purpose due to faulty planning and implementation, misgovernment and corruption. As a result, it augmented the flood situation, adversely affecting cultivation and the environment. This chapter exposes and narrates this story of development. I shall now go into six infrastructural and technological developments I came across in the region and the social, economic and political landscapes associated with them in order to expose the complexities created by these ‘high-modernist’ developments in the region.

1. New Land Reclamations and Intensification of Floods

How does the new land reclamations, presented in Chapter 3, affect floods? When paddy fields and waterbodies are filled up in the name of ‘development’, it reduces the flowing area of the floodwater. As a result, water starts flowing over the reclaimed areas, mostly inhabited places, increasing the adverse effects of even the normal floods. Swaminathan (2007: 72) has verified this fact. According to what I learned, any small modification in the delicate landscape of Kuttanad could affect and damage the ecology. In that way, it could be said that all land reclamation activities done by the government, the tourism industry, the real-estate industry, and even the inhabitants are creating ecological imbalance in the region. This understanding was a bit bothering because as shown in Chapter 3, aren’t there reclamations that are necessities like for habitation, infrastructural developments, etc? I comprehended that this is a hard truth regarding the fragile ecology of a region lying below sea level. From my discussions with people from the agricultural community in Champakulam and Ramankari whom I sometimes met separately and sometimes met in small groups of three or more, I was informed that given the fact that reclamations are not good for the ecology of the region, people must at least abstain from illegal reclamations. This points at what Siva (1988: 44) wrote, ‘disruption of nature is always violent and visible, whereas balance and harmony are experienced, not seen.’ However, as already shown in Chapter 3, public and private developments necessitating land reclamations and encroachments continue without any regard for the ecology of the region.

2. Bunds and Dykes

Kuttanad was created by putting up traditional mud bunds and dykes around the paddy fields to protect the fields from floods. As most of these bunds were still made up of mud at the time of my fieldwork, the breaching of these bunds and dykes during rainy seasons when the water level rises in the waterbodies, was a common happening in the region, bringing desolation and loss to paddy cultivators. Hence, my informants engaged in paddy cultivation, kept constant vigil over their fields throughout the year, especially during the rainy seasons, as the bunds could breach any time.

Concrete Bunds and the Ecology of the Region

One of the remedial measures taken by the government to prevent breaching is construction of concrete bunds. At the time of my fieldwork, more and more outer bunds were being converted into concrete bunds. Once I was walking around in the paddy fields in Moncompu to meet and talk with people and I met Pappan, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer who was levelling his paddy fields. Standing on the mud bund surrounding the paddy field where Pappan was working, I brought the topic of bunds in our conversation. He said, ‘Concrete bunds are unsuitable for the

ecology of the region. It is too heavy for the earth here, which is human made and a wetland lying below sea level.' Prabhakaran's (1981:9) account exposes the fragility of the ecology of the region verifying the above contention. He wrote that boats in Kuttanad region could not go fast as the ecology is fragile and the waves will cause the bunds to breach, letting water into the paddy fields. The study of Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999: 65) also affirms the statement of Pappan. They noted that the introduction of reinforced granite bunds instead of earthen bunds to facilitate additional crops of rice during monsoons have done extensive damage to the environment in the upper reaches of Kuttanad.

In 2007, the Swaminathan Commission suggested the construction of concrete bunds in those areas where bund breaching was a regular incident and eco-friendly bunds for the rest of the region. The development project under the recommendations of the Commission is still going on in Kuttanad. From what I learned, the government is not following the recommendations of the Commission properly and is building concrete bunds even in places not suggested by the Commission. This is jeopardizing the entire ecological balance as stated by the inhabitants and reported by Business Line (November 2011). This indicates the misgovernment and corruption prevalent in the system. The politicians I met in Chennankari, Puthukari, Moncompu and Champakulam who were from the LDF and the UDF on the other hand told me that their governments are making all efforts to construct concrete bunds around the paddy fields in accordance with Swaminathan's Report. However, my visits to the paddy fields where concrete outer bunds are constructed in different villages revealed the faulty construction of bunds. Here water seeps into the paddy fields through the gaps in the bunds in times of floods.

I met Thankachan, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator in Ramankari while he was helping his neighbour, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer who was ploughing his paddy fields. It was during one of my strolls in the paddy fields in Ramankari that I met him. When we talked about the building of bunds in the region, he brought my attention to the corruption involved in the process of bund construction. In his opinion, governments take advantage of the dire problem of bund breaching in the region to obtain votes. Hence, without proper study of the region, they build bunds to keep their promises and to please the voters. He also told me that the government allots huge amount of money for building concrete bunds but it often ends up in the pockets of politicians, contractors and those engaged in the building of bunds. It is true that the construction of concrete bunds being an expensive endeavour it is mostly the government that undertakes the work as shown by Government of Kerala (1971). It is also true that over years, huge amounts of money were allotted by the government for the construction of concrete bunds as shown by Government of Kerala (1974:4). Even though I could not find any more material evidences to

verify Thankachan's accusation, the failed and incomplete concrete bunds seen around Kuttanad gave me the impression that what Thankachan said could be true.

Mud Bunds and the Ecology of the Region

My investigations revealed that even though the chances of breaching are high, mud bunds are the most suitable for the region. Some of the paddy fields I visited had banana and coconut trees and *graminaceous* plants, locally named *karakam*, grown on the bunds surrounding them. *Karakam* is a superior soil binder that thrives in the area. It did not cause any harm to the environment like the concrete bunds. However, such natural soil binders are somehow becoming extinct. As the concrete bunds are also not very effective in preventing breaching due to faulty construction, there is a general opinion that it is better to grow *karakam*, which is harmless to the environment. Semi-permanent bunds made with clay and vegetation are being constructed in some parts of the region now, which are more suitable than concrete bunds. Kuttanad is yet to find a permanent solution to the problem of breaching bunds but the agricultural community did not support any solution that did not respect the ecology of the region and always raised concern. Breaching bunds make the repair and maintenance of mud bunds extremely important in Kuttanad. At the time of my fieldwork, every time before cultivation started, the agricultural community themselves had to bear all the expenses related with the annual repair and maintenance of mud bunds and this also contributed in increasing the cost of cultivation. The ethnography here shows that instead of bringing developments that suit the ecology of the region, the government is seen impetuously begetting developments that are unsuitable to the region in their haste to make profit and to please the inhabitants for getting their votes, disregarding the local knowledge and needs, the ecology and the inhabitants. Furthermore, corruption made matters worse. Now I turn to the next development.

3. *The Kuttanad Development Scheme*

The highly criticized and the most obviously failed development activity undertaken by the government was the Kuttanad Development Scheme with an estimated cost of Rupees 43 million (543,644.28 Euro), which consisted of three schemes: The Thottappally Spillway (1955), the Thanneermukkom Bund (1974) and the AC (Alappuzha-Changanassery) Road (1958). I collected most of the data regarding these three projects from the Taluk Office at Moncompu. I visited the village offices in Karumadi and Kavalam also to talk with the bureaucrats regarding these projects. The secondary sources I collected from the libraries in Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam and the works of Kannan (1979), Balchand (1983), Sreejith (2013) and Lakshmi (2018) were also helpful in my understanding of these projects. In addition to these, personal observation and accounts of informants also widened by comprehension. Both

Thottappally Spillway and Thanneermukkom Bund were constructed with the motive of preventing and controlling floods and intrusion of salinity from the sea to increase the production of paddy. The AC Road was constructed as part of infrastructural developments with the hope of bringing further development of the region. I will first write about the Thottappally Spillway and the Thanneermukkom Bund before I proceed to the AC Road.

A research into the frequency of rice cultivation in Kuttanad showed that rice was cultivated in the lower area of the region only once in two or three years till the second decade of the 20th century. This system of cultivation was intended to secure the benefit of fresh silt deposits brought by the floods enriching the soil in the rice fields. In 1916, an experimental research station was set up in Kuttanad to study the feasibility of annual rice cultivation. The trials conducted by the experimental research station proved that annual cropping was feasible, but efforts were not made to follow it up and the experimental station was closed down in 1921. However, annual cultivation became a regular feature as a result of the pressure exerted by the Travancore government to augment rice production due to shortage of rice during the Second World War. It was in order to raise a second crop annually in an area of about 52,000 hectares of land that the Thottappally Spillway and the Thanneermukkom Bund were constructed (Government of Kerala 1974). This progression in the frequency in the production of paddy indicates the increase in the demand of paddy and the commercialisation of paddy cultivation. However, my research into the Kuttanad Development Scheme showed that due to poor implementation, misgovernment and corruption, the harmful impacts of these developments today are far greater than its constructive effects.

(1) Thottappally Spillway

I sometimes used the Thottappally spillway-cum-bridge to go from Alappuzha to the libraries in Thiruvananthapuram. The Thottappally Spillway was constructed to divert the floodwater from the rivers Pampa, Manimala and Achenkoil flowing from the Western Ghats into the Arabian Sea before it could flood Kuttanad. However, my research into the development with the help of secondary sources, interviews and personal observations showed that the Spillway was not a complete success because the engineers who designed the structure did not manage to create a system that maintains a seaward gradation to facilitate the flow of water into the sea. While designing the spillway, the problem of water piling up due to the raising sea level during the monsoon and the consequent formation of a sandbar on the seaward side of the spillway was not taken into account. Therefore, before the monsoons assumed full force, the sandbar had to be cut open on a wide length before the spillway could be opened to let the floodwaters drain into the sea; otherwise, the sea water would find its way into the channel through the spillway

and reverse the flow of the floodwater. Since Kuttanad lies below sea level, the flow of water into the sea is extremely difficult especially in the rainy season, when the rivers overflow and the water in the sea also rises.

The variations in the water level, as well as the direction of the flow of water within Kuttanad during the different months of the year, especially during the monsoons were not studied in sufficient detail before deciding the spillway location. Hence, there are doubts whether the present location is the right one. Due to difficulties in the acquisition of land for the project as it belonged to powerful sections of the population, the width of the approach channel to the spillway was made considerably smaller than the original design as stated by Kannan (1979). Kannan has provided details regarding this. He noted that the maximum discharge of water from the three rivers all of which empty into the lower reaches of Vembanad was estimated to be about 189,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second) during the peak monsoon months of July and August. Of these 5,000 cusecs of water would escape into the Kayamkulam Lake through the opening along the Kollam-Alappuzha Road, which was on a general level with the garden lands in Kuttanad area. The spillway was designed to discharge 65,000 cusecs of water, which, if realized, would have meant a speedier subsidence in the flood levels within Kuttanad and, consequently, facilitate early cultivations. However, Kannan pointed out that the spillway failed to discharge the designed rate of flow as it could not discharge more than one-third of it, that is, some 20,000 cusecs, thereby proving to be far less effective in keeping down the flood level than had been expected. I crosschecked this information during my interviews with the bureaucrats in the village offices and they also told me the same.

Due to poor implementation, management and maintenance, untimely intrusion of saltwater through the spillway has also become a permanent concern for the cultivators. If the salinity level increases, the crop is affected. Only if the salinity level is less than 0.5 dsm-1 (dissolved solutes in milligram per litre), the crop would be ideal. If the salinity level goes above 1 dsm-1, the yield goes down considerably. The lake water near Thanneermukkom Bund was found to measure 9.33 dsm-1. In most places of Kuttanad, it is 3 dsm-1 and above. Uma seeds are mostly used in Kuttanad as it can tolerate up to 3 dsm-1. But if the salinity level goes up, even those would not survive. Hence, it has been comprehended that instead of curbing, the construction has only aggravated the problem of floods and salinity. Balchand (1983), Sreejith (2013) and Lakshmi (2018) confirms the failure of this development.

(2) Thanneermukkom Bund

The Thanneermukkom Bund, which is 1,402 metres long, is constructed 22.5 km north of Alappuzha. The bund divides the Vembanad *Kayal* into two distinct zones i.e. the northern part near Cochin with perennial brackish water and the southern part with freshwater fed by the rivers draining into the lake. I have always relished the trip through the Thanneermukkom bund-cum-bridge watching the sea on the one side and the lake on the other side. The bund was constructed with the aim to prevent saltwater intrusion from the sea into the paddy fields of Kuttanad during the summer months. The construction of the bund without proper study of the geography adversely affected the whole region, as I will show in the following pages. The Bund is also blocking the flow of the floodwater from Kuttanad into the sea during the monsoons, which is increasing the flood situation. Hence, the Thanneermukkom Bund also failed to serve its purpose as verified by Kannan (1979), Balchand (1983), Sreejith (2013) and Lakshmi (2018). Now I shall explain how these developments are affecting the region as I observed during my fieldwork.



Photo 8. Thottappally Spillway.



Photo 9. Thanneermukkom Bund

The Impact of Thottappally Spillway and Thanneermukkom Bund

I was making a walk along the paddy fields in Kannadi when I met Kutty, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer. After working in the hot sun, he was resting by the side of his paddy fields on a mud bund covered in sweat. It was a time I was exploring the Kuttanad Development Scheme that I met him, so I posed questions related with the development. Kutty told me that the both the bund and spillway were constructed with good intentions, but he related it to the local tale of

the foolish farmer who killed his duck, which laid golden eggs, assuming he would find more golden eggs in the duck's stomach. This metaphor indicates the desire of the government to increase the production of paddy to fulfill the growing demands of rice and its aspiration to make more profit. As my fieldwork proceeded, at times I felt that my ethnography was drowning in the marshes of misery. But then, I realized that it is the reality I see and hear in my field. I shall first demonstrate the impact of the Bund and the Spillway on paddy cultivation and then secondly on the environment in Kuttanad.

Prior to the building of the bund and the spillway, agricultural seasons varied from place to place on the basis of saltwater intrusion, irrigation facilities etc., so that the demand for agricultural labour could be met. Now with the stipulated opening and closing of shutters, seasonal variations are levelled and new standardized rhythms are set in, which simultaneously increase the demand for labour and machines causing paucity in the availability of labourers and machines. This in turn results in sharp increase in wages and crop failures. It also waddled the traditional cultivation practices. Though saltwater incursion was a constraint for the cultivation of the paddy crop in the past, the agricultural community knew how to make use of it in the cultivation process. Saline water used to be let into the fields immediately after harvesting. This prevented the growth of weeds and pests, thereby increasing productivity. The absence of salinity and the luxuriant growth of weeds are now prompting the use of chemical weedicides in the fields, thereby increasing the pollution. The entire Kuttanad area comprises marshlands with decayed vegetable matter below 1-2 inches of the topsoil and has a high percentage of carbonaceous wood. The resulting acidity of the soil has been a major constraint in the cultivation of paddy. The traditional solution to this problem was to leach the soil by applying lime immediately after harvest and letting in water for the remaining period. The tidal ebb and flow helped dissolve the acidity in the water and wash it away from the land. Such natural washing cannot take place when the bund and the spillway remain closed.

Now I turn to the environmental issues. I found that the environmental impact of the development scheme is adversely affecting the living and livelihood conditions in the region. Some of the concerns I am bringing up here are water stagnation, pollution, problem of waterweeds, scarcity of drinking water and decline in the fish and coconut industries. I shall now elaborate them.

Water Stagnation

The closure of the Thanneermukkom Bund once every year (usually in December) in the name of preventing saltwater entry into the paddy fields, completely stop the flow of water, stagnating

the entire waterbody on the southern side of the bund. Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999) pointed out that this closure obstructs the natural drainage system by disrupting the flow of water in and out of the Kuttanad region. In addition to this, dams are constructed in the upper reaches of the rivers that flow into Kuttanad, in order to control floods, again with a view to develop paddy cultivation. These dams also obstruct the flushing out of the ecosystem and contribute to stagnating the entire waterbody.

Before the construction of the bund, even during summer months when there was no flow from the rivers into the region, Kuttanad enjoyed the cleansing impact of the sea's tidal action. Whereas now, since the region does not receive any rain during the period in which the bund remains closed, the water level in canals and other water courses recede and within a matter of few weeks the water is polluted. Moreover, the prevention of the flow of water in and out of Kuttanad cause the water from the rice fields, adulterated with chemical pesticide and fertilizer residues to remain in the waterbodies. These stagnant waterbodies are not taken care of by the inhabitants or the government. The practice of dumping wastes in and around the region further aggravate the situation of pollution.

Pollution

It is a common sight to see inhabitants depositing their solid and liquid wastes into the waterbodies close to their houses and work places. In addition, solid waste from Alappuzha and Kottayam medical colleges and sewage from the municipalities of Kottayam, Thiruvalla, Changanassery and Alappuzha are mostly dumped into the waterbodies all over Kuttanad as reported by Times of India (February 2013). I observed that the duck sellers also contribute in polluting the waterways as they dump the remains of slaughtered ducks into the waterbodies.

The four rivers flowing from the Western Ghats also contribute to pollution. Wastes from the mountains are getting deposited in Kuttanad because its flow into the sea is blocked by the Thanneermukkom Bund and the Thottappally Spillway. The pollution brought by the rivers includes chemicals and pesticides used in the upriver plantations and estates as well as regular waste dumped by people all along the river course. The pollution produced during the Sabarimala pilgrimage season by the pilgrims who come from all over India to see God Ayyappan also ends up in Kuttanad. About 50 million people come to the shrine during the peak season, that is, in November, December and January. George and John (2015: 29-39) notes that the sewage from the toilets and waste from hotels and other commercial establishments during the pilgrim season are drastically polluting the rivers flowing into Kuttanad. I came across a number of studies and reports showing the deplorable plight of the canals and

waterways in Kuttanad due to pollution like Biminith (2008) and Narendran (2010). Kittunni, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer was clearing the waterweeds in front of his house in Kannadi when I met him. He is a friend of my uncle who lives in Champakulam and that is how I got in touch with him. Among the several topics we discussed while he was clearing the weeds, we also talked about pollution. He said, 'Kuttanad, the rice bowl of Keralam is turning into the waste bowl of Keralam.'

I realized that there are no adequate measures to handle wastes in Kuttanad, as elsewhere in Keralam and India in general. The panchayat does not have enough vehicles to come and collect the waste and there are no special places reserved to dump waste. Government of Kerala (2009: 7-8) stated that solid waste continue to be a seemingly unsolvable issue all across the State, in spite of the various initiatives taken to contain them. According to the report, most of the panchayats, municipalities and corporations face the issue of not being able to manage the solid waste that is being dumped out of homes and establishments.

The politicians I met during this period who belonged to Indian National Congress, Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (Mani), Nationalist Congress Party and Communist Party of India told me that their government was doing everything possible to manage the wastes. They were talking about their particular governments when they were in power. I met most of these politicians separately in the different villages I did fieldwork. I raised the same issues to all of them when I met them. What I am writing here is a condensed form of what they told me. They pointed out that there are even laws against waste dumping. I came across several rules and laws against waste dumping in Kerala Government's online cite called Suchitwa Mission, which confirmed the statement of my politician informants. But according to them, no matter what the government does, nothing will work unless the inhabitants themselves change their waste disposal habits. I talked about waste disposal and pollution to several people I met in the different villages and towns in my study area to know their responses. Thirty-seven informants who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians I met in Mithrakari, Thakazhi, Pulinkunnu and Ramankari agreed that it was the responsibility of the inhabitants also to keep the region clean. However, according to Thankachan, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Ramankari who was one among them, 'The government has rules and laws for everything, but these rules and laws are just the government's tactic to wash hands when trouble comes.' He pointed out that there are laws to prevent the throwing of wastes around but the government does not have much competence to collect it or to recycle it. Then what is the point in having rules and laws?

Waterweeds

Kochuraman, an Ezhava ferryman from Champakulam, was taking me around in his small canoe when suddenly we were completely blocked by a thick blanket of waterweeds, making it impossible to go forward. Kuttanad has an unusual growth of these floating plants that have become a hallmark of the region and an increasing nuisance.³² We had to turn the canoe back and take another channel, less affected by waterweeds to proceed to the place where we were heading. It is a common problem that the weeds damage engines in motorboats and obstruct the movement of boats and canoes.



Photo 10. The thick growth of African *payal* in one of the canals.

Waterweeds accentuate the problem of wastes in the waterbodies. In addition to this, the waterweeds are the favourite home and breeding space for mosquitos. Especially since the waterbodies remain stagnant and uncared for, these mosquitos become dangerous transmitters of communicable diseases like diarrhoea, japan fever, chikungunya, dengue fever, dermatitis, jaundice, colitis, amoebic dysentery, typhoid, worm diseases etc. as disclosed by Balachandran (2004), Prasad (2006) Government of Kerala (2011) and Dwivedi (2011: 45). While talking about waterweeds and the mosquito menace with Kittunni, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer I met in Kannadi, he brought my attention to the important role played by frogs in checking the insects that destroyed crops and the mosquitos in the past. But then he told me that frogs have almost disappeared in Kuttanad following the largescale capture and export of frogs from the region in the 1970s because there were no frogs left to reproduce and multiply. This disappearance of frogs led to the increase in mosquitos and other insects, which in turn prompted the use of insecticides, thereby increasing pollution in the region. However, I learned that now there are laws against capturing frogs, tortoises etc. in Keralam. Besides this, the thick blanket of weeds

³² It is locally believed that these waterweeds reached Keralam in 1955 and was first noticed as a serious pest around 1964.

are also a threat to the establishment of a commercial inland fishing industry because fishermen cannot operate their equipments wherever there are waterweeds.

When I brought up the topic of waterweeds to the people I met in the different villages of Kuttanad, hundred and sixty-five informants who belonged to both agricultural and non-agricultural communities from the various castes and communities told me that the Thanneermukkom Bund is responsible for creating the environment favourable for the luxuriant growth of the waterweed. Among them was Raman Unni, a Nayar landlord-cultivator who is a family friend I met in Chennankari. He pointed out that the use of chemical fertilizers was creating changes in the aquatic environment, making it favourable for the dense growth of the waterweed. My investigations showed that before the construction of the Thanneermukkom Bund, the weed problem was insignificant because most of the year, when there was no cultivation, the region remained submerged under water and there was enough flow in the water to take the weeds down to the sea. During summer months, the region was affected by the intrusion of salinity, which helped in the natural deterioration of the weeds.

Similarly, when water was the only mode of transport and communication and people earned their livelihood solely from Kuttanad, the inhabitants cleared the weeds and took proper care of the water and the waterways. Now, with the number of roads increasing, and the need for waterways declining, most inhabitants are less interested in clearing weeds, which is also leading to its overgrowth. Pachan, a politician belonging to the Communist Party of India who was from Nedumudi said, 'The people are lazy to clear the weeds even in front of their houses and they put the blame on the government.' Sitting on the banks of the River Pampa, we were talking about development initiatives in the region. It was through one of my agricultural community informants I met him. I also learned that the construction of roads criss-crossing the region, with no regard for the flow of the rivers and canals are also preventing the flow of the waterweeds into the sea. During my life in the region, I have realized what a menace the waterweeds is for the people. But the inhabitants have to live with it.

What are the inhabitants doing with the waterweeds? The politicians I met from the different political parties in the region did not know what to do with it and often said that the only solution is to remove it whenever it is there. That was what the inhabitants were doing at the time of my fieldwork. The canal running right in front of Rajamma's house was filled with African *payal*. She is an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Pulinkunnu. She was clearing some of it from the front of her house with a big rod and had made a net fence in the water as a barrier to prevent it from floating towards her house. I had seen many others also doing the same. I observed that

in many places, the weeds are now being removed with the co-operation of the people, especially the women's organizations like *Thozhilurappu* and *Kudumbasree*.³³ In a way, this has become an employment and an income now for some women. As these organizations are part of the decentralization scheme of the government, the politicians I met took the credit for the removal of waterweeds. However, the cultivators had to bear the expenses of clearing the weeds from the paddy fields and spend a major portion of the amount they set aside for paddy cultivation on the removal of weeds, which was a highly expensive and labour intensive operation. This additional expenditure was a burden for the cultivators I met. Those who suffered the most from waterweeds told me that the mechanical method of controlling weeds was the most effective and economic means, but it was not properly developed. Weeds exist in varying habitats ranging from small ponds and navigation canals to vast expanses of inland lakes and is at varying stages of growth. No single machine can control the weeds in all these areas and so a variety of machines have to be developed. But even at the time of my fieldwork, no such machines were successfully developed.

I found the inhabitants finding new methods to turn the weeds into wealth, such as using it as organic manure, for mulching in coconut and cocoa gardens and as raw material for paper and cardboard industries. The possibility of producing methane gas and power alcohol from it is also under consideration. In spite of all efforts so far undertaken, the African *payal* still remains spread in the waterbodies. Thankamani, a Pulaya agricultural labourer I met in Mithrakari was clearing the weeds in a canal next to her house. She said, 'The *payal* will continue growing as long as the Thanneermukkom Bund remains closed.'



Photo 11. Women engaged in clearing the waterweeds.

Photo 12. Some inhabitants using an excavator to clear the African *payal*.

³³ *Kudumbasree* is related to the *Thozhilurappu* scheme. Under *Kudumbasree*, every family below poverty line is organized into a neighbourhood group at the local level consisting of 15 to 40 families with each family being represented only by a woman. The neighbourhood groups are federated into an Area Development Society (ADS) at the level of the Ward of the Village Panchayat, which has a population of around 15000 to 20000. ADS is an organization of the poor and is basically a woman's group. The ADSs in a Village Panchayat are federated into a registered body called the Community Development Society (CDS). Each neighbourhood group, ADS and CDS has five volunteers carrying out different functional roles. The ADS has been entrusted with the task of organizing public works under *Thozhilurappu*. Welfare amenities to the workers are provided by the ADS.

Drinking Water

After applying coconut oil on his body, Kutty, a cultivator-labourer from Kannadi, jumped into the river flowing in front of his house. He said, 'Even though we have four rivers flowing through Kuttanad, we do not have safe water to drink!' There is a popular saying about Kuttanad, 'Water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink.' Kutty's wife, Sarasamma, an agricultural labourer in Kannadi, came to wash her dirty pots and pans in the same river her husband was taking bath. A neighbour woman, Madhavi, an agricultural labourer, was also washing her clothes there. There was even a time when houses had outlets of septic tanks into the water. However, in spite of all this, Kuttanad remained healthy as long as the rivers flowed. Until the recent past, water flowed in Kuttanad serving all the needs of its inhabitants – bathing, washing, drinking, cooking, irrigation, and so on. The problems began when the water stopped flowing.

Pure drinking water is a major problem in Kuttanad, which is an outcome of the developments carried out in the region. Narendran (2010) and Dwivedi (2011) have mentioned about this problem of the scarcity of potable water. All the houses I visited experienced this scarcity and everyone raised the issue. Chemical fertilizers, pesticides and all the wastes dumped into the stagnant waterbodies that are filled up with thick waterweeds create a dangerous situation of pollution in the matter of potable water, especially when the bund and the spillway remain closed. There were only a few pipelines and public water taps seen at the time of my fieldwork. They were the result of a long struggle by the inhabitants. Seventy-three informants from both agricultural and non-agricultural community from Champakulam, Mampuzhakari, Mithrakari and Karumadi told me that water comes in these taps only once or twice a week, mostly at midnight. If a pipeline breaks somewhere, there will be no water at all for days until it is fixed. I met these informants separately on different days during my visits to the different villages. A report of the difficulties created by pipeline breaking in Kuttanad region in *The Hindu* (May 2019) affirms this statement of my informants.



Photo 13. A woman going to a nearby pipeline to fill her container with water at the time of floods. This image depicts, ‘Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink.’

Fifty or sixty years back, before the coming of the various roads and pipelines, when the surrounding waterbodies had a significant role in the life of the region, each household maintained their own natural ponds and tanks for potable water but this is no longer practised due to changes in the living styles and conditions. This is reminiscent of what Ingold (2000) wrote about traditional cosmology giving way to technology disrupting proper conduct towards the environment. Groundwater recharging occurs when water moves from the wetland down into the underground aquifer. The paddy fields help in recharging the groundwater reserves by holding rainwater. However, as more and more fields are getting filled up due to new land reclamations, the quantum of rainwater permeating down is reduced accordingly. I read a report of Government of Kerala (2009: 7) that affirms this. It stated that as paddy fields are essentially water conserving tanks replenishing the groundwater, its conversion to other purposes affects water availability. In addition to this, I also learned that the continuous removal of sand from the riverbeds by the sand miners, often referred to as ‘sand mafia’ in Kuttanad, at a rate faster than what is replenished, cause the riverbed to sink, which in turn lower the groundwater level, creating scarcity of drinking water, especially in summer. I noticed that in spite of all pollution, many inhabitants are still using the contaminated water in the waterbodies for their daily needs even without boiling it.

The depleting availability of pure drinking water being an important welfare issue, the political parties use it as a powerful tool during elections. One of the main ‘development’ promises during election campaigns is to provide pure drinking water. There is a competition among political parties for taking the credit for providing ‘(un)reliable’ pipeline water in the different parts of Kuttanad. All the politicians I met during my fieldwork irrespective of political parties told me about their accomplishments in bringing water pipes in their different constituencies.

But I noted that the voters are now skeptical. Rajan is a Nayar cultivator-labourer I met in Chennankari. His children are working abroad but he and his wife are fully dedicated to and engaged in paddy cultivation. It was when we were talking about the scarcity of potable water that he said, 'The government is only concerned about winning the elections. It is for that they come around promising pure drinking water. Hence, I do not support any political party. I vote for one party after the other to get things done for me. If someone tells me that they will bring drinking water to my place, I vote for them. If they do not bring it, I will not vote for them in the next election.' I found out that many of my informants in Kainakari, Pulinkunnu and Kavalam, no longer belong to any political party, as their plight remained pitiable, no matter which party came to power. Indushekar (2009) has written about the Alappuzha constituency where the voters had no stable inclination towards any particular political party.

Corruption was also mentioned as going hand in hand. Karthiyani was a Pulaya agricultural labourer I met in Moncompu. Her parents were from Kainakari but she moved to Moncompu after her marriage more than forty years back. She told me about the loss of enormous amount of money through corruption from the government treasury in the name of providing drinking water. She substantiated her assertion with an example. The State Government had commissioned an enormous overhead tank in Kainakari in 1989 spending Rupees 70 lakhs (84,806 Euro) but there had never been any water in the tank ever since it was built. Even though this figure sounded farfetched, I came across two blogs/articles in the internet written by M. Suchitra (www.indiatogether.org) and Xavier Julappan (www.bridgeurasia.com) that have mentioned the same. Even at the time of my fieldwork, this water tank at Kainakari remained useless. Many in Kainakari often mentioned about this tank while talking to me about development failures. I have also seen similar unused, waterless water tanks elsewhere in the different villages in Kuttanad like in Ramankari. Hence, it could be said that even though a number of pipelines have been brought here and there in the different parts of Kuttanad, this state of affairs exposes the lack of concern of the government with the problems of the inhabitants and the region. I realized that instead of finding a permanent solution, they are mainly using this crisis of water scarcity as a means to seek votes to come to power.

In such a state of scarcity, I realized that the inhabitants have started searching for solutions to the problem of drinking water. Members of the agricultural community were running awareness programmes in the villages on the need to take care of water. As a result, an increasing number of people were understanding the value of collecting rainwater for drinking and cooking purposes. Thirty families from both agricultural and non-agricultural communities I met in Champakulam, Moncompu and Ramankari who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian

Christians were using rainwater harvesting methods to secure potable water. However, several other people I met could not afford to set up rainwater harvesters as it costed more than Rupees 5 lakhs and hence had to rely either on pipe water supply or use the water from the contaminated waterbodies. Kuttanad Vikasana Samithy (KVS) had set up over 1,000 rainwater harvesting tanks with a capacity of 10,000 litres of water. In Champakulam-Nedumudi region, tubewells are also dug to get freshwater. However, tubewells are not a good solution in most parts of Kuttanad because the groundwater is far too acidic. In this way, the inhabitants I observed were finding their own ways of sustenance and survival.

Fish and Coconut Industries

Adverse effects of development activities are experienced not just in paddy cultivation but in all other environment sectors, as they are all interconnected. Besides paddy cultivation, other occupational activities too form the environment of Kuttanad. Two of them are fishing and coconut industries. Even though paddy is the main occupation, these minor economic activities are very important for the sustenance of life and environment in the region. Even though my ethnography deals mainly with paddy cultivation and cultivators, I feel that a glimpse into the effects of development into other sectors also will help to widen the scale of the understanding of the complexities in the region.

Fish Industry

Being a region surrounded by waterbodies it was easy to understand when Mathamma, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Mithrakari said, 'Kuttanad is not just the rice bowl but is also the fish bowl of Keralam.' I met him while he was catching fish from the river in the village and that is how this conversation came up. The estuaries, floodplains, lakes, ponds, canal networks and lagoons are home to a wide variety of fish that have adapted to the fluctuating freshwater and salinity conditions and the differing water levels in the wetland. Sometimes I travelled around the region on autorikshaws. Once I happened to take Pappunni's auto rickshaw while going around in Karumadi. Pappunni was a Pulaya autorikshaw driver from Karumadi. He and his family have paddy fields on which they work and he engages in fishing as well. When I asked him about the fish industry while he was taking me around, he explained to me, 'While the wetland remains largely a freshwater body during the monsoons, freshwater species brought in by the rivers dominate, and when the water turns saline in the summer, aquatic species adapted to brackish waters and migrating from the sea dominate.' According to him, several species are truly endemic to the fluctuating salinity in the brackish waters and can be seen throughout the year.

My research into the matter with the help of secondary sources gave me the information that some of the commercially important species of the tract are grey mullets,³⁴ milk fish,³⁵ marine cat fish,³⁶ pearl spot,³⁷ freshwater prawns,³⁸ edible crab³⁹ and black clam.⁴⁰ Fishing is resorted to on a large scale in the course of the breeding season, in the canals and inundated paddy fields as well. The environment is most appropriate for the fishing industry and it is a flourishing and profitable industry and a means of livelihood for many. Inland fishing was once highly popular in Kuttanad. I found that apart from those who are engaged in fishing round the year, it is undertaken as a secondary occupation by some of the locals during paddy cultivation off-seasons. All these activities declined recently with the regional developments.

My investigation revealed that due to the construction of the Thanneermukkom Bund, some of the species that existed in the region have now vanished, while others have become a rarity. Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999: 65-66), Padmanabhan et.al (2001: 10, 14-15), Biminith (2008) and Padmakumar (2013: 69) have exposed this ecological dilemma. I learned that the bund also resulted in the extinction of mangroves and other estuarine ecosystems that used to function as favoured nursery areas of brackish water, finfish and shellfish resources. Apart from this, the excessive use of pesticides and chemicals in the paddy fields has also resulted in the destruction of several species of fish. The survey conducted by the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers, Government of India in 2016-17 showed that Keralam occupied the fourth place in per hectare consumption of pesticides. Kannan is a Pulaya fisherman from Thanneermukkom. He had paddy fields where he and his family worked but he mostly worked as a fisherman. I met him during my fieldwork in Thanneermukkom. While sharing with me the problems related with fishing, he said, 'The unsustainable capture of diminishing fish for export purposes for the global market is also a problem here.' I have heard this topic being discussed a couple of times during various local meetings I attended during my PhD period and before. These meetings were often organized by people belonging to the agricultural community to discuss local problems in the region. Sometimes, some of the issues they discuss in such meeting will be taken up to higher political levels and gets solved. Other topics remain unsolved.

As part of my enquiry into the fishing industry, I met some informants in the different villages of Kuttanad who were engaged in fishing occupation. When I asked Gregory, a Latin Catholic fisherman who often sold fish at my ancestral house in Champakulam his opinion about the

³⁴ *Mugil cethalus*.

³⁵ *Chanos chanos*.

³⁶ *Tachysurus*.

³⁷ *Etroplus suratensis*.

³⁸ *Machrobachium*.

³⁹ *Scylla serrata*.

⁴⁰ *Villorita cyprinoides*.

Thanneermukkom Bund he said, 'When the region got one additional crop of rice, it diminished the income of the fishermen community.' Chinnamma was a fisherwoman I met in Kumarakom. She was the woman who sold fish in a homestay I stayed in the village. While talking to her about the condition of the fishing occupation she said, 'There was a steep rise in fish prices following the construction of the Thanneermukkom Bund, denying the poor like us, our traditional protein source.' In addition to the Bund, large quantities of sediment deposition by the rivers flowing into the region and the land reclamation for different 'development' purposes are also challenging the livelihood of the fishing community.

During the course of my fieldwork, I got to know that there are regular conflicts between the paddy cultivators and the fishermen on the issue of opening and closing the shutters of the Thanneermukkom Bund. The fishermen oppose the bund because they want saltwater and fishes to enter inland for breeding and better catch. The commonly agreed period for the closing and opening of the bund is 15th of December and 15th of March. However, at times the bund is closed for longer periods due to pressure from the paddy cultivators. This is against the demands of the fishermen. However, some fishermen and paddy cultivators ask to keep the bund open throughout the whole year due to the negative impact of the bund on agriculture and the larger wetland system as a whole. As it was only a minority view, it was not taken up seriously at the time of my fieldwork. This winds up my query of the effects of the development scheme on the fishing community in Kuttanad. Now I shall move on to its impact on the coconut industry.

Coconut Industry

Every household in Kuttanad has a coconut tree in its courtyard. Coconut trees have been of immense economic importance to the small and marginal agricultural holdings in the region. The abundance of water is helpful for the growth of coconut trees. The coir industry in Kuttanad is concentrated more in the areas around Alappuzha town. Apart from the *Ezhavanmar* who were engaged in toddy tapping in my study area, I had only a very few informants who were engaged in coconut products and coir related industries. Those who were associated with the coconut industry in my study area were engaged in the manufacture of coir, rope, sacks and processing of coconut products like dried coconuts, vinegar, coconut powder, activated charcoal and oil. Some were engaged in the transport and marketing of coconut and coconut products. However, there were many who benefited by the sale of coconuts in their groves and gardens after domestic use. This made coconut an important crop contributing to the household income.

Similar to the efforts of the Rubber Board to convert paddy fields in Kuttanad into rubber plantations, mentioned in Chapter 3, there had been efforts to convert the paddy fields in

Kuttanad into coconut gardens also but such projects failed due to popular opposition and the region's special geographic features as I have mentioned in Chapter 3. However, on the pretext of this development project, many paddy fields were filled up for entirely different purposes as stated by Vaalath (1994). One of the uses of coconut trees in Keralam is for extracting toddy, a popular alcoholic drink. Rajan (2010) noted that alcohol and toddy contributed one-fourth of the income of the State. Hence, in order to use the tree for tapping toddy, some inhabitants were in favour of converting paddy fields into coconut groves. In 2015, the UDF Government in Keralam took an initiative to ban alcohol consumption in the State due to the rising violence related with alcohol consumption. This was opposed by the Communists and others across the State. However, when I raised this matter to the people I met during my visits to the various villages, informants from the agricultural community in Moncompu, Thakazhi and Kannadi who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians, had the opinion that there are people in both the UDF and LDF Governments that support the conversion of paddy fields to coconut groves. However, I did not find any paddy fields getting converted into coconut groves at the time of my fieldwork. Still, the empirical data shows the divergent perspectives of development of some inhabitants and the government.

My investigations into the coconut industry showed that regional developments are adversely affecting the coconut cultivation also as pointed out by Swaminathan (2007: 126) and Indushekhara (2009). Kannan (1979) had shown that during the months when the Thanneermukkom Bund remains closed, the water level north of the bund rises by 2-3 feet, with a corresponding decline in the southern parts i.e. where saltwater intrusion is prevented. Consequently, in the garden lands north of the bund, water seeps in and remains stagnant causing considerable damage to the healthy growth of coconut and other trees. This condition remained the same even at the time of my fieldwork. Moreover, the regional pollution also adversely affects the coconut trees. Incidentally, I realized that the coir fibre production involving coconut husk retting in the shallow waters of the Vembanad *Kayal* and its waterways is itself a major contributor of water pollution.

Hence, I comprehended that the Kuttanad Development Scheme adversely affected the coconut industry also. In addition to paddy cultivators, fishing community and coconut cultivators there are ample others engaged in divergent other occupations living in this region. The adverse effects of the regional developments, changing living conditions and the transformation of the landscape affect all these people. Even though my research focuses mainly on the paddy cultivators, the condition of the others is hardly any different. During the course of my fieldwork, I felt that all these adverse effects of the bund and the spillway on paddy cultivation

and the environment could have been avoided if the local knowledge of the inhabitants have been sought by the planners of development. Now I turn to the third project under the Kuttanad Development Scheme, that is, the construction of the AC Road.

(3) AC Road – Development of Transport and Communication

The Alappuzha-Changanassery (AC) Road is a 24 km long road that passes through Kuttanad region connecting the two towns, Alappuzha and Chanaganssery. Completed and opened in 1958, it was the first road to pass through the paddy fields of Kuttanad. The construction of the AC Road was part of the government's agenda of infrastructural development of the region with the hope of bringing further developments. The road was constructed and completed when the Communist Party was in power in Keralam. Unlike other State highways, which were conversions of existing pathways or village roads, 99% of the AC Road was newly constructed. It was constructed by filling up the paddy fields. The road crosses a number of canals and three rivers, namely River Pallathuruthi, River Nedumudi and River Kidangara, which are tributaries of River Manimala and River Pamba. The three bridges across these three rivers were constructed only in the 1980s. Until then people had to use the ferry. The road lies parallel to the Alappuzha-Changanassery (AC) canal, which was built by the Travancore Government to empty the floodwaters of Upper Kuttanad into the River Nedumudy and the River Pallathuruthy, which flows into the Vembanad *Kayal*. However, the development project of the Travancore Government was also not a success as the size of the canal was not big enough to absorb all the floodwater. The AC Road was constructed without taking this into consideration and hence the road gets submerged during every monsoon season. However, it must be acknowledged that apart from the monsoon flood seasons when the road remains under flood water, the AC Road is extensively used by people and is of immense service. Therefore, a scrutiny of the Kuttanad Development Scheme, shows that unlike the Thanneermukkom Bund and Thottappally Spillway that are not only construction failures but also generate environmental adversities, the AC Road remains mainly as a symbol of failure in its construction. What interested me more during my research into the AC Road was the development of other roads following the construction of the AC Road. It exposes the convolutions of development in the region.

Before the construction of the AC Road, water was the only and main means of transport and communication in Kuttanad as can be seen from the accounts of Ward and Conner (1893),⁴¹ Prabhakaran (1981) and Government of Kerala (1974, 1975, 1989, 2005). Even though these studies point out that water transportation was highly developed in Kuttanad in early times,

⁴¹ Government Publication.

when compared to road transportation, water transportation was extremely slow. It made life tough in the region. Joseph, a Latin Catholic politician from Kerala Congress whom I met in Mampuzhakari explained the conditions of life before the coming of the AC Road. He was talking to the Public Works Department (PWD) workers who were repairing a link road in the village when I met him. He is one of my acquaintances from before. According to him, the slow canoes and boats could not handle emergency situations in Kuttanad and that was one of the greatest shortcomings of water means of transportation in the past. People living in the interiors of Kuttanad on the small distant islands and on the banks of rivers and canals had to depend on sellers coming on their canoes to buy necessities. Thus, I learned that the demanding life conditions made the construction of roads a great development, wholeheartedly welcomed by all the inhabitants in the region.

Now, roads reach almost every nook and corner and it can be seen crisscrossing the length and breadth of Kuttanad. Given the fact that the AC Road was built in 1958, I was surprised when a bureaucrat at the Public Works Department (PWD) at Moncompu, told me that all the roads other than a few main roads like the AC Road, Ambalapuzha-Thiruvalla Road, etc. were built only after 2008. Why was there a big gap in between? Pradeep is a Nayar social worker from Kavalam. He is a member of the KVS and that is how I met him. He was part of the various protests in the region against land reclamations. During one of my interviews with him, he brought my attention to the connection between the construction of roads (infrastructures) in Kuttanad and the introduction of new economic policies by the Government of Kerala in 1991. An enquiry into Pradeep's statement revealed that all roads were built by the government as part of their project of infrastructural developments following the opening up of the economy. This was further confirmed by my interviews with the politicians in the region.

Practically every politician I met from the different political parties told me that one of the reasons why people, both insiders and outsiders, were reluctant to invest in the past was because of the remoteness of the region and the underdeveloped conditions of the modes of transport and communication. With improved transport and communication and increased accessibility, more people are willing and coming forward to invest in non-agricultural sectors such as trade and tourism as can be seen in the different parts of Kuttanad. Hence, they pointed out that their respective governments gave immense importance to the construction of roads. Jomon, a Latin Catholic politician from Chennankari was one among them. According to him, infrastructural developments are not only to make peoples' life convenient, but also to attract investors. Thus, it becomes clear that the intention of the government for building roads in the region is to attract investments for further development in order to enhance capital. Another reason is that

following the opening up of the economy in the 1990s, there was a leap in the automobile industry in Kerala and more and more people in Kuttanad started purchasing vehicles, and roads became a necessity. When this change happened, in order to facilitate development and also to win votes, the government took initiatives to bring more roads. There is nothing wrong in this development drive of the government. What is wrong is the manner of development followed. I shall discuss this next.

Defective Construction of Roads

None of my informants liked to remain cut off from the rest of the world. Almost all of them who lived in Kuttanad had children, relatives and friends studying, working or having settled outside. It takes less than an hour now for a person from Kuttanad to reach the nearby towns by car or bike, using the new roads. Many people use the roads daily to travel between work and home. Hence, everyone supported the construction of roads, which benefited them in many ways. Still, I met several people who condemned the construction of roads in the region. Why? Gradually, as my research proceeded, I learned that most of the roads in Kuttanad are constructed without taking into account the direction of the flow of the waterbodies. Roads are built across paddy fields and waterbodies, filling them up with earth thereby blocking the flow of water, preventing the drifting of waterweeds into the sea, causing stagnation and increasing pollution and the consequences of floods. I observed several roads built in this manner throughout Kuttanad during my fieldwork. More over I came across some studies also that affirms the faulty manner of road construction in the region. Swaminathan (2007: 169) has pointed out that during the past thirty years, the government, the panchayats and various groups of persons had been undertaking hectic uncontrolled or unplanned road building criss-crossing the region, with no regard to the direction of the water flow. His report asserted that these seriously blocked floodwater ingress and egress leading to at least 4-5 or even more flash floods in a year, each lasting for 7-10 days. Biminith (2008) has also written about the faulty ways of road construction in Kuttanad, which was increasing the intensity of floods. All this point at the manner of development in the region.



Photos 14 and 15. Road built cutting across paddy fields.

Corruption and Development of Roads

My research into the possible reasons why roads and other infrastructures are being constructed in defective ways bringing adverse affects on the environment exposed the corruption and misgovernment involved in the system. I maintain the anonymity of my informants, as these are contentious issues. I learned that to fulfil the development promises declared during election campaigns, to obtain the votes of people and due to corruption, roads and other infrastructures are build without proper and prior investigation, ignoring the environmental facets, thereby leading to adverse effects on the ecology. It is the local MLAs that plan and propose the location of infrastrcutures, and secure permission and funds from the government to build it.⁴² Even though it is the PWD that constructs roads and other infrastructures in Keralam, the officers at the PWD in Kuttanad said that they have no power to object it even if they know sometimes that the proposed constructions would adversely affect the environment. Many keep silent to not invite the displeasure of the politicians and the government. Hence, planning and implementation of developments become the sheer monopoly of the politicians and the government.

I raised this issue of corruption involved in infrastructural developments to several people during my visits to the different villages. According to what eighty-seven agricultural and non-agricultural community informants from Champakulam, Puthukari, Ramankari, Mampuzhakari and Kavalam who were Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian

⁴² MLAs are Members of the Legislative Assembly.

Christians and low castes converted Christians told me, it is easy for anyone to build roads by bribing the MLAs or their political supporters. Informants working in the PWD in Kuttanad itself agreed about corruption. As the coming of roads increases the value of adjoining properties and provides scope and opportunities for enhancing wealth, which in turn gives the possibilities of rising up in the social hierarchy, it is probable that there are many who take advantage of corruption as a means to bring roads to their properties. Even though almost all the politicians I met told me about the different roads they helped to bring in their different constituencies across Kuttanad, they never agreed about corruption but often blamed other political parties for constructing roads without taking the environmental aspect into consideration. However, the case of former minister Thomas Chandy stated in Chapter 3 is a clear proof of corruption, where the various departments cooperated through distortion to make illegal constructions and roads, thus exposing the crucial point where the territorial and capitalist logics of power intersect as stated by Harvey (2003). Hinting the involvement of even the members of the agricultural community in corruption, some officers I met at PWD told me that even many who are part of the environment protection movements have roads coming right in front of their houses. I have also noticed this during my fieldwork but I do not have any evidences to show their involvement in corruption. Also some facts remain vague because when a road comes in an area, there would be many people who benefit from it; not just the persons involved in corruption. However, all of this shed light at the corruption that is resulting in environmental problems in Kuttanad.

Water Transportation and Communication

I observed that in spite of the increase in the number and demand of roads, people still used both land and water for transportation and communication. They walked and cycled through the bunds and dykes surrounding the paddy fields, used canoes and boats in the water and private and public motor vehicles on the roads. I felt that the waterbodies that criss-cross Kuttanad encourage water transportation. None of the inhabited tracts is distant from a navigable stream. This could be a reason why several of my informants in Kainakari, Pulinkunnu, Moncompu and Champakulam from both agricultural and non-agricultural communities who were *Nayanamar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians raised their support for the development of water means of transportation in the region. Nanu Ashan, a Nayar teacher and my uncle's friend from Chennankari, who was one among them, told me that bus services, mainly government services are available only on the main roads. There are still many regions in the interiors where roads have not yet reached and water is still the only mode of transport and communication like for example, Kainakari. Hence, the development of

water transportation will be a great help to those people who have no vehicles and who still depend on the waterways for transportation.

According to what I learned from Nanu Ashan and others, this would help to make full use of the resources in the region. It would increase employment opportunities and is energywise more prudent at a time when fuel prices are soaring. It is less polluting than motor vehicles and also reduces the traffic jams. I read an article written by Babu (2008) which is an account of his interview with the former Communist Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan. In the interview, V.S stresses the need to improve and bring to use the waterways in Keralam in order to solve many of the problems connected with transportation and environment. Ramesh, an Ezhava tractor driver I met in the paddy fields in Kavalam was also one among those who supported water transportation. He said that more roads would be built in the coming years, as there are many areas without road connections. He said it would be much appreciated, therefore, if the government could be more ecologically considerate in the future construction of roads, learning from its failures. The appeal of the inhabitants for development of water transportation indicates their desire for alternative developments and a change in their orientations towards technology as proposed by Heidegger (1977).

My research into the Kuttanad Development Scheme significantly influenced my understanding of developments in Kuttanad. I comprehended and observed that the Kuttanad Development Scheme has more adverse effects than benefits making life and livelihood difficult for the inhabitants. I could trace the haunting presence of corruption and mismanagement related with developments in the region. The development initiatives and failures and its consequences in Kuttanad does not end here. I noticed that the increasing use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in my study area was intensifying pollution, making life conditions miserable in a region already shattered by development activities. I realized that this is closely connected to another major development undertaken by the government, that is, the Green Revolution. I now turn to this topic.

4. The Green Revolution in Kuttanad

The Green Revolution was a widely acclaimed agricultural development project welcomed by the Government of Keralam in the 1960s to commercialise cultivation of rice and to increase the profit from paddy production. The role played by the Green Revolution in opening up the doors for high-yielding variety seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides in Kuttanad is consequential. During the 1950s and 1960s, the increasing population together with a number of other factors led to severe food scarcity in India. As a result, the Government of India was

forced to import foodgrains from abroad. In order to ensure food security, the Central Government understood that domestic food production had to be increased somehow. Circumstances during that time materialized for the beginning of the Green Revolution under the leadership of M. S. Swaminathan. The Green Revolution became the Indian Government's most important development program in the 1960s. Fertilizer-responsive varieties of rice suitable for the rice growing tracts in India were developed. Large extents of land were brought under cultivation, hybrid seeds were introduced, and organic fertilizers and pesticides were replaced by chemicals.

These inputs soon started having results. The country's dependence on imported foodgrains decreased every year. In the 1990s, India had surplus foodgrains and once again became an exporter of foodgrains. However, Kesavan and Iyer (2014: 2037) noted that in 1968 itself, M.S. Swaminathan himself had predicted that the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides could result in an agricultural doom rather than an agricultural boom in the long-run. He foresaw that Green Revolution could degenerate into a 'Greed Revolution'. Before long, the Green Revolution turned out to be a commodity centered intensive chemical input-based agriculture in India, leading to decrease in the fertility of the soil.

Kuttanad, with its tremendous natural resource potential was one of the two regions in Keralam, selected by the government to implement and test the Revolution. The other region was Palakkad in North Keralam. People supported the Revolution, thinking of the enormous productivity it would bring in paddy cultivation, without knowing the adverse effects that the use of high-yielding variety seeds and chemicals would bring to the region and their life. The Kerala Government encouraged the revolution and the use of high-yielding variety seeds and chemical fertilizers and pesticides by giving heavy subsidies. The government subsidies for high-yielding variety seeds and chemical fertilizers and pesticides have only been increasing ever since, creating a huge economic burden on the government as pointed out by Mina Anand in her article in Business Line (July 2019). She stated that the government subsidies for synthetic fertilizers have ballooned from Rupees 60 crore in 1976-77 to a mammoth Rupees 75,000 crore in 2019. Gradually traditional seeds and organic manures became unavailable in the local markets, which became flooded with the products of the Green Revolution (See Tables 4 and 5). It exposes the rude expansion of capitalism and the capitalist economy in my study area, relegating the local production methods and knowledge.

As the hybrid seeds do not reproduce themselves, the cultivators are forced to buy new supplies of soil exhausting seeds every year. However, the seed cost is later reimbursed as subsidy of

50% or even sometimes 100% by the government depending on the availability of funds in the government treasury. The new variety seeds are more prone to pests and diseases. This in turn is forcing intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides as expounded by Padmakumar (2013). As crops and pests became more and more immune to chemicals, they require stronger and costlier application. On top of this, as many fields are being reclaimed or left barren or uncultivated, intensive cultivation has to be done in the remaining fields where paddy is cultivated, which again requires the increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in order to produce the required quantity of rice in the State. All these increased the cost of production and were favourable for the seed and chemical fertilizer and pesticide companies. The disappearance of traditional seed varieties and the organic manures with the coming of hybrid varieties and chemicals point at the imperial pretensions of agronomic science about which Scott (1998) wrote. He showed how the imperial pretensions of agronomic science – its inability to recognize or incorporate knowledge created outside its paradigm – sharply limited its utility to many cultivators. Like how Scott argued, the uncritical and hence unscientific trust in the artefacts and techniques of what became codified as ‘scientific agriculture’ led to explicit contempt by the protagonists for the practices of actual cultivators and what might be learned from them.

The majority of the paddy cultivators I met were sowing high-yielding variety seeds and using chemical fertilizers and pesticides but a few of them were interested in and supported organic cultivation. There were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians among this few. I met them in the villages of Champakulam, Mampuzhakari, Kavalam, Pulinkunnu and Ramankari. The accounts of these informants indicated that the high modernist development projects like the Green Revolution were making the otherwise independent and self-sufficient agricultural community, vulnerable and highly dependent on the government and external suppliers of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, weedicides and machines. The remoteness generated by Kuttanad’s distinctive geography had made the agricultural community independent and self-sufficient in the past. They developed their own unique ways of doing cultivation, which is completely different from the rest of the State. They produced their own seeds, manures and tools. They had their own animals and people to do cultivation. The question asked by my informants who supported organic farming was, did not the agricultural community produce paddy satisfactorily without destroying the soil and the health of the people before the introduction of Green Revolution. In their opinion, the Green Revolution was a needless development brought in Kuttanad by the government, putting an end to the traditional manner of cultivation, which was done in a sustainable manner. This was the past pride of the agricultural community in Kuttanad. Their pride in traditional wisdom had to be surrendered before the modern methods of ‘scientific’ agriculture making the situation reminiscent to

Ingold's (2000) assertion of the triumph of technology over cosmology. Was there any meaning in surrendering the traditional ways of cultivation practices?

An Evaluation of the Revolution

An investigation of the effects of the Green Revolution showed that the use of high-yielding varieties, chemical pesticides and fertilizers did not bring the desired effects in Kuttanad or in Keralam. Santakumar and Rajagopalan (1995) argued that the effect of high-yielding varieties, chemical fertilizers and pesticides did not supersede that of the traditional varieties, the organic manure and the manual pest control methods. Their study showed that organic manure is as effective as, if not more effective than, chemical fertilizers. The immense profit reaped by landlord-cultivator Jose Venganthara after the 2018 floods in Kuttanad using only organic manure, which is mentioned in the epilogue of this thesis is proof of this fact. Santakumar and Rajagopalan further wrote that the use of chemicals was advocated by the protagonists as a means to control even weeds. Scientists conducted several experiments to compare the efficiency of different chemicals (weedicides) against the traditional hand-weeding method. None of the experiments conducted in the period showed any clear superior results compared with hand-weeding. Comparing organic and chemical fertilizers, Santakumar and Rajagopalan showed that most of the experiments conducted during this period of transition proved that chemicals were at best equivalent, if not inferior, to organic materials. None of these experiments proved the superiority of chemicals. Hence, they argued that the total deterioration of the fertility of the paddy fields in Kuttanad due to increased dependence on the use of poisonous fertilizers and pesticides could have been avoided. They asserted that this points at the serious failure on the part of the government in its development programmes. The study of Santakumar and Rajagopalan supports the claim of my informants who supported organic farming and points at the needlessness of implementing Green Revolution in Kuttanad.

Cheriyian's (2004: 28-29) study showed that though the total area under rice in Keralam declined, the area under high-yielding varieties had not declined. Therefore, the average productivity of the State remained above the national average. Using the 1997 Economic Survey, she showed that the area under high-yielding varieties was retained, which points to the fact that the yield was good in those fields. But the good yield was maintained with increased use of chemicals, which in turn led to considerable deterioration of the fertility of the soil, necessitating more and more application of chemicals and the process continues in circles. I met Girish, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer while he was spraying fertilisers in his paddy fields in Kavalam. He said, 'In Kuttanad, improvement in agricultural production is the short-term

impact of the Green Revolution. The long-term impact is ecological degradation, which creates unhealthy living conditions.’

This cycle of applications that has become the norm of cultivation in Kuttanad led to a belief among many of my informants that it is only because of the Green Revolution, with its high-yielding variety seeds and chemicals that paddy cultivation is still surviving in Kuttanad and the region is able to produce the amount of rice it is producing. My informants included politicians from all political parties in the region and even members of the agricultural community in Champakulam, Kavalam, Ramankari, Nedumudi and Thakazhi. I counted their statement as true until the news of the successful harvest of Jose Veganathara who did paddy cultivation on 1000 acres of land in Kuttanad using only organic manure came up after the 2018 floods. The floods might have increased the fertility of the soil by bringing in new silt deposits, but still it exposed and confirmed the superiority of the local, traditional methods of cultivation and knowledge and pointed to the fact that there are alternative ways of development, which are different from the destructive capitalist modes followed so far.

This context of Green Revolution is comparable to what Biersack (2006: 270) wrote about the tension that is between an ecology that is embedded in society and an ecology that operates independently of socio-moral considerations. This also points at the international development institutions and their local manifestations about which Brosius (1999: 37) wrote and is suggestive of what Broch-Due (2000: 47) stated that international development institutions and programmes have broad but vaguely defined agendas that include a wide range of actions for development. She noted that most often, such development programmes will not have any knowledge of the special characteristics of the localities where they are implemented and hence, largely unsuitable for local conditions. The best example is the Indo-Norwegian Project in fishery (Klausen 1968).

Green Revolution and its Consequences

Two main consequences of the transformation brought by the Green Revolution I noticed in Kuttanad at the time of my fieldwork were the degradation of the soil and the spread of pollution and diseases. The increase in the number of times of cultivation from once in three years to three times a year itself is exhausting the soil in Kuttanad. In addition to this, the continuous cultivation in rice fields with soil exhausting high-yielding rice varieties along with the indiscriminate use of fertilizers and pesticides were causing serious soil degradation at the time of my fieldwork. The Hindu (December 2016) and Ameerudheen (2019) affirms this state of the paddy fields. Ameerudheen (2019) quotes the explanation given by Professor EV

Ramaswamy, head of the School of Environmental Sciences of the Mahatma Gandhi University in Keralam as to how the excessive use of pesticides has harmed Kuttanad's ecosystem: 'Pesticides kill microorganisms in the soil. Many of the pesticides being used are not targeted. They not only kill pests, but whatever comes in the way. Healthy microbes and macroorganisms that keep the soil fertile are killed by the indiscriminate usage of pesticides. We may get a good yield as a result but this is not a sustainable way of farming.' Siva (1988) is one of the Indian scholars who vehemently oppose Green Revolution and the application of chemicals. Regarding the Green Revolution, she stated that even though it increased agricultural production, it brought environmental damages in India. She criticized the modern reductionist science, which she wrote was a powerful tool used by the global capitalist powers to exploit the resources of the world for the global market bringing destruction to nature and environment. Hence, I realized this is an impact of the Green Revolution in Kuttanad, which could have been avoided or lessened if the traditional organic and sustainable means of cultivation was followed.

During my days in Kuttanad, I learned how chemicals diffuse from the paddy fields into the waterbodies and the atmosphere augmenting pollution and spreading diseases. This brought before me the third impact of Green Revolution in Kuttanad. An investigation into the use of chemicals in the region surprised me. I learned that some of the chemicals used in Kuttanad are not among those recommended. For example, the Kerala Agricultural University restricts the use of certain chemicals like methyl parathion and monocrotophos. Methyl parathion is an organophosphate pesticide and insecticide classified as extremely hazardous by the World Health Organization and the Rotterdam Convention. It is not allowed for sale in nearly all countries around the world, while a few allow it under specified conditions. Monocrotophos is also a highly toxic organophosphate insecticide. Interestingly, the most commonly used chemicals in the region are methyl parathion, followed by monocrotophos as shown by Devi (2007).

Ameerudheen (2019) has written about the excessive and unwarranted use of chemicals in Kuttanad. He has included a 2016 study conducted by the School of Environmental Sciences of the Mahatma Gandhi University in Keralam that found traces of 16 pesticides such as BHC,⁴³ DDT,⁴⁴ endosulfan, aldrin, endrin, heptachlor and diedrin in Kuttanad. The study noted that 40% of the chemical pesticides used in the area belonged to the organochlorine category, which tend to accumulate in organisms and become more concentrated as they pass up the food chain. The study also confirmed the use of banned organochlorine products such as endosulfan and

⁴³ Benzene hexachloride.

⁴⁴ Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane.

BHC in Kuttanad's paddy fields. According to the study, such residues may lead to the contamination of food chain or leaching into the soil, mixing with the runoff water and contaminating the adjacent water bodies or contaminating the ground water. Devi's (2007) study also affirms the increasing use of chemicals in Kuttanad, which is poisoning the region. According to a report in Livemint (July 2009) roughly 15,000 tonnes of chemical fertilizers, 500 tonnes of insecticides and 50 tonnes of fungicides are used annually at a cost of about Rupees 6 crore.

I made an attempt to trace the connection between the spread of pollution and diseases in the region, with special reference to cancer. During my fieldwork, many times I came across statements of inhabitants regarding the increasing incidence of cancer in the region. Being a cancer survivor myself, this caught my attention and I became interested in making an enquiry. It was when I started my research that I realized that not many scientific studies of the incidents of cancer in the region have been conducted. This made my research demanding and I found it impossible to make any precise conclusions.

The Hindu (January 2010) reported of a survey conducted in Kainakari in August 2010 by the Department of Community Medicine of the Alappuzha Medical College, the Regional Prevention of Epidemic and Infectious Diseases (PEID) Cell and the State Disease Control and Monitoring Cell (SDCMC). It covered 8,091 people from 1,809 houses in Kainakari and found that 91 deaths, making up for 27 per cent of the total 334 deaths in the village from July 2004 to July 2009 were due to cancer. Interestingly, even though the survey affirmed that pesticide pollution in Kuttanad was a fact, it stated that it could not confirm that there was an association between cancer deaths/prevalence and pesticide pollution in drinking water, more so because cancer was multi-factorial. Ajayan reported in the Livemint (July 2009) that doctors in the Alappuzha Medical College confirmed that 499 patients who received treatment at the radiotherapy department of the Alappuzha Medical College Hospital between January and May in 2009 and 355 patients during the same period in 2008 and 300 patients in the year 2007 were mostly from the Kuttanad belt.

Deccan Chronicle (February 2017) reported that the panchayat level data available with primary health centres of cancer patients who registered with the palliative care units in 2016 revealed the following figures: Champakulam-50, Nedumudy-42, Ramankari-60, Thakazhy-89, Kavalam-80, Pulinkunnu-40, Kainakari-70, Thalavadi-40, Edathua-44, Veliyanad-28, Muttar-32 and Neelamperoor-57 all in the Kuttanad region. However, these reports also cannot confirm the connection between pollution and cancer. Even though The Hindu (January 2018) also

informs of increased cancer incidence from the Kuttanad region, no precise conclusion can be made due to lack of scientific studies. Due to lack of government initiatives to study the connection between cancer and chemical use in the region, some private initiatives were undertaken in this regard as shown by Livemint (July 2009). However, due to social stigmas associated with the illness it was impossible to make a clear study and analysis. Some hid it for fear of losing their honour in the society simply because of the occurrence of the disease. Some dreaded losing good matrimonial alliances to their family if people know that they have such a disease inherited in the family.

All these created uncertainties making it difficult for me to draw a conclusion regarding the connection between the two. However, it is obvious that the daily application of high doses of chemicals in the paddy fields are exposing the inhabitants to these poisonous materials. Almost all my informants sprayed chemicals in their fields without taking any safety measures. I also learned that when it comes to those applying chemicals in the paddy fields, there is practically no insurance or welfare measures for them, if and when they become ill. Normally it is the landlord-cultivators, the cultivators or the persons they assign to buy them who buy the chemicals from the market. The sellers give instructions to them about how to apply the chemicals. The buyers in turn instructs the labourers who come to apply them in the fields according to how the sellers tutored. Apart from this, none of my informants went for any training about how to use the chemicals. As the labourers who come to apply the chemicals are appointed by the landlord-cultivators or the cultivators and are not any designated licensed pesticide applicator and as there is no proof of any relation between cancer cases or illnesses with the application of chemicals there are no insurances or welfare measures for the labourers.

Why was not the government taking any initiatives to study the relation between cancer cases and the use of chemicals in the region? When I discussed about this with Vasana, a landlord-cultivator in Champakulam who was leveling his fields, he said that the sale of chemical fertilizers and pesticides are rooted in corruption. Pointing at the importance given to profit/capital over human life by the government he said, 'The government will not conduct any studies because then the government will have to take action against many of the chemical companies here.' My further investigations indicated that what Vasana asserted could be true. The Agricultural Department of the Kerala Government is the agency for implementing Insecticides Control Orders. The agricultural officers are responsible for inspecting the insecticides used in the State.⁴⁵ There are separate quality control laboratories also in various parts of the State. However, the quality of the control made by the department appears to fall

⁴⁵ There is one officer each for every panchayat.

far below the desired standards. Though substandard pesticide samples are reported in Kuttanad, such reports have triggered little action. Even if occasionally a sale of particular substandard batches of pesticides are banned, by the time such decisions become implemented, most of the pesticides would have been sold already. In her study of pesticide use in Kuttanad, Devi (2007) pointed out that the statistics provided by the Health Services Department of the State showed that there are no cases of health hazard due to occupational exposure to pesticides, something, which she argued, was quite unrealistic, and instead indicated the malpractices and corruptions at all levels of government.

All this does not clear the ambiguities connected with cancer and pollution in the region. But it exposes the approach of the government towards the deteriorating conditions in the region, created by developments. On the one hand is the life of the inhabitants, which depended on the environment in Kuttanad, and on the other hand is the profit of the fertilizer and pesticide and seed companies, which also depended on the same environment. For one group, the resources in the region are life and livelihood, while for the other group the resources are commodities for making exorbitant profit. However, it has to be noted that in spite of all the adverse effects the Green Revolution brought in Kuttanad, the inhabitants also benefit or benefited from the commercialization of agriculture. To almost all my politician informants from all the political parties in the region, the Green Revolution and the application of chemicals and high yielding varieties were part of their government's effort in making the 'inefficient' traditional agricultural practices, 'modern' and 'scientific'. If health is a central indicator of development generally, in Kuttanad, the health of the people is at stake precisely as a result of all the 'developments'. This underscores the question, what is 'development' in Kuttanad?

When I asked my informants from the agricultural community, why they neglected the health hazards and continued to work in the toxic fields using such dangerous chemicals, despite knowing how poisonous it is, they told me that it is due to financial needs. Many of the cultivators I met in the different villages of Kuttanad were in a desperate state, trying one fertilizer and pesticide after another to save their crop. I realized that this was part of the competition between cultivators irrespective of castes and communities to make a better harvest than the neighbour. This uncovers its connection to the competitions between inhabitants to rise up in the social hierarchy. The chemical companies took advantage of this competition between the cultivators to make profit. Most of the cultivators, especially those I have included in group 2 in Chapter 9 who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, and Syrian Christians cared only about the yield and not about the environment, which is typically due to their desire for placing themselves high in the social hierarchy. Thus, I found both the people and the government using

development as a means to exploit the natural resources in Kuttanad to bring changes in the social hierarchy and to enhance capital. And in the process of development, environment was seen deteriorating.

Development and Environment

The six infrastructural and technological developments presented in this chapter thus exposes the government efforts to prevent and control floods, to increase the production and profit from paddy and to attract investments for further development of the region to enhance capital. However, these development efforts have transpired into failures adversely effecting the inhabitants and the environment. I came to understand that one of the major reasons for this is the exclusion of inhabitants while planning developments in the region. This was a main complaint raised by the agricultural community I met. It is true that it is not possible to find a single solution to the various environmental problems in Kuttanad because of the differences in the geographical features within the region. The *kari* lands, *karappaadam*, *kayal* lands, *kol* lands, etc. in Kuttanad have its own topographic characteristics. Hence, a very thorough knowledge of the region becomes essential for planning developments.

Rajan was a Nayar cultivator-labourer I met in Chennankari. According to him, 'No one knows the land and the water better than its agricultural community; not even the government that rules the region.' He pointed out that most of those who plan and implement development projects in Kuttanad are not its inhabitants and hence they do not know anything about the region. The failure of the construction of concrete bunds and dykes, Thottappally Spillway, Thanneermukkom Bund, AC Road and other roads, the Green Revolution and related problems, and the flawed land reclamations all shed light on what Rajan stated. It points at the lack of knowledge of the geography of the region, the needs and sense of place of the inhabitants and the neglect of local knowledge by the executors of development, whether they are inhabitants of Kuttanad or not. During my visits to the PWD office and other government offices, I noticed that there are officers from both inside and outside Kuttanad. However, as pointed out earlier in the section on road constructions, the politicians have a big role in the planning and implementation of developments, and corruption and misgovernment go hand in hand. The inhabitants are also making efforts to thrive in the changed and damaged circumstances and to make money in order to rise up in the social hierarchy. Hence, it is impossible to place the blame on any one locus be it the politicians, political parties, the government, the entrepreneurs, nor any section of the inhabitants. All these various elements form part of the whole, that is, the plight of contemporary Kuttanad. All of them are using development as a means to exploit the

natural resources in Kuttanad to bring changes in social stratifications and to enhance capital, and in the process, environment is damaged.

The political, economic and social factors at play behind the developments in Kuttanad exposes the other dimensions of infrastructures than the mere physical and technical, as expounded by Pfaffenberger (1988) and Larkin (2013). The fixing of the infrastructural developments without giving attention to the geography of the region and the local knowledge and variations, leading to environmental degradation, points at the decontextualized high modernist endeavours about which Scott (1998) wrote. The spatial reorganization presented in this chapter sheds light at the assertions made by Harvey (2003) regarding the structural, institutional and legal changes a region undergoes when it is brought into the logic of capitalist development and the State's role in the whole process. The infrastructural and technological developments symbolize 'the fixed capital embedded in the land' about which Harvey wrote. The problems created by the developments exposes the dispossession of the people from their traditional lifeworlds. It is possible to consider the infrastructural and technological developments as a result of the change in the attitudes of the people, and as a result of the commodification of environment, as Ingold (2000) stated. It is also possible to perceive the meeting of the capitalist and local lifeworlds in this chapter in the way expounded by Brosius (1999) and Biersack (2006). The fact that paddy continues to be cultivated in spite of floods and all the environmental problems reminds of what Tsing (2015) wrote about how Matsutake mushroom grows in capitalist ruins. Kuttanad exposes how life survives in the ruins of capitalism.

Conclusion

This chapter thus illustrates the consequences of defective human interventions on the physical landscape or the environment in Kuttanad. Beginning with the human efforts to tackle the problem of floods, it exposes the lamentable state transpired into by a region subjected to development initiatives for making profit and enhance capital, done without regard and understanding of the environment and its inhabitants. It also sheds light on the quandary into which people subjected to such development endeavours reach and their helplessness in having to adjust with the predicament. Thus, Chapters 3 and 4 of Part I exposes the physical landscapes of Kuttanad. However, the physical landscape is inseparably linked to the people connected with the terrain. This paves the way for an exploration of the social landscape of the region, which is presented in the four chapters of Part II that follows.

Part II

Chapter 5

The Inhabitants and the Region of Kuttanad

My understanding of the transformation of the physical landscape paved the way for my understanding of the social, economic and political landscapes in the region. Hence, if one part of my research deals with land and the other part is concerned with people, my study is also an exploration of the people-land relationship. The new land reclamations and the changing patterns of land utilization, the floods and all the development efforts taking place at the same time, expose the people in the region – their (changing) relations with the landscape. In Part II, I concentrate on the people. As paddy fields form the major portion of the landscape of the region, paddy cultivators form the majority of the population, and together they constitute the main background of my ethnography. However, inhabitants engaged in a range of other occupations also form my field of study. This Part illustrates the changes happening in the social landscape parallel to the transformations happening in the physical landscape in Kuttanad. Part II is divided into Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. Rooted in history, Chapter 5 epitomizes the relationship between the inhabitants, between the inhabitants and the region, and the changes that have happened over the years. Chapter 6 demonstrates how the changes in the relations between people and the region presented in the previous chapter affected paddy cultivation. Chapters 7 and 8 are interconnected and portray the social composition and stratifications I saw at the time of my fieldwork. When Chapter 7 introduces the traditional social hierarchy, comprising the different castes and communities that inhabit the region, Chapter 8 discusses the rise of class and individualization in the society, which is a result of economic and political dynamisms in Kerala and India. Chapter 7 and 8 illustrates the way people are trying to cope socially with the transformations that are taking place and the changes happening in the social structure. Hence, the three chapters of Part II are connected to each other and demonstrate the social transformation in Kuttanad.

In this chapter, I begin with an account of the relationships in the past and then proceed to the present state of affairs. After that, I show how paddy cultivation brings all of them together in the paddy fields. The historical records and secondary sources I collected from the libraries in Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam and the accounts of my informants helped me to traverse into the history of the region. These methods together with participant observation aided me to grasp the intimate and complex relations of the inhabitants towards their paddy fields and the region.

The Relationship between the People and the Region

I found that in Kuttanad, the two main factors that strengthened the bond between the people and the region were the unique geography and the occupation – the paddy cultivation. Remoteness and the peculiar geography of the wetland led to the evolution of a legendary existence, so unique to this region. The inhabitants evolved a very distinctive lifestyle, depending entirely on the resources around them for subsistence. ‘Our land gave us everything. Water gave us fish and land gave us rice and coconuts. Our land never left us go hungry,’ expounded Neeleswari, an Ezhava agricultural labourer I met in Champakulam while she was washing clothes in the canal that flowed in front of her house. Their pride and attachment to the place was further strengthened by the fact that they were the ‘creators’ of this region.

The challenges imposed by nature further adapted the population to the region – the biggest challenge being the floods. Even today when breaches happen, all members of the agricultural community work together to protect the field. Though they belong to different castes, religions and social positions, they forget all their differences at that moment. ‘Everyone’s life depended on the paddy field and paddy cultivation. Our parents were born in the field, they lived in the field and died in the field,’ recalled Raghavan, an Ezhava landlord-cultivator from Pulinkunnu. His family has generations of agricultural relations to my family in the region. I had a conversation with him when he visited my ancestral house in Champakulam to meet my uncle who was not well at that time.

The sanctity of paddy fields was given utmost importance by the inhabitants until about sixty years back. They respected the paddy field as a temple. Just like when they entered the temple, they used to walk only barefooted in the field. They spoke about the field and the tools used therein with great respect. They never allowed it to be ‘polluted’. This was sixty years and back. Things had changed drastically at the time of my fieldwork. Whenever I listened to historical accounts, I felt that the ‘past’ was a mix of different sentiments and emotions, both sweet and bitter for my informants from all castes and communities in the villages and towns of Kuttanad, making it an imagined world of its own, distant and different but still close to them.

The paddy field was a stage where the drama of ‘pollution’ was performed. I found it an interesting contradiction that the low castes and communities who were considered as polluted were allowed to enter and work in the paddy fields that were considered sacred. However, menstruating women were never allowed in the fields. They who worked in the fields were subjects of untouchability, unapproachability and all sorts of physical and psychological cruelties related with the caste system. Surprisingly, pollution was practiced even inside the

paddy fields among the ‘polluted’ themselves. *Ezhavanmar* considered themselves superior to the *Pulayanmar* and refused to work in the paddy fields together with the *Pulayanmar*. Hence, they worked separately in clusters, keeping a distance from each other. As the ‘pure’ stayed away from the fields, the ‘impure’ slogged in the fields. Another paradox was that the paddy field is the centre that united people. At the same time, it is the centre that created hierarchies and divisions in the society of Kuttanad. However, the success of paddy cultivation demanded the unity of the people who were divided into different castes and communities.

The landlord-labourer relationship in Kuttanad and the Changes over the years

Agriculture being the predominant economic activity that brought together various sections of the society, the relationship between the inhabitants that emerged over agriculture was the core of the social structure in the region. An understanding of this land system would provide a better grasp of the current conditions. The landlord-labourer relation that existed in Kuttanad was part of the *Jenmi* system that existed in Keralam. During the period of kingship in Keralam, the ownership of land was with the king, who at his will assigned lands to individuals and they were to pay tax to the king. As long as the individuals paid tax due to the king/government, they had the control (but not full ownership) of the land. These landlords were called *Jenmikal*, the plural for *Jenmi*, meaning landlord and the whole system was called the *Jenmi* system. In course of time, these *Jenmikal* became socially, economically and politically powerful. However, the State being more powerful than the *Jenmikal* and owning more land than them, the *Jenmi* system faded away with the various land reforms brought by the different governments in favour of the cultivators and agricultural labourers, starting from the Pattam Proclamation of 1865 by the Travancore Government. The various social reform movements in Keralam, the coming to power of the Communist Government in 1957, the land reforms of the late 20th century, the social, economic, political and cultural changes brought about by education, migrations and remittances, the new economic policies and the various developments that ensued completely shattered the *Jenmi* system and the landlord-labourer relationship in Kuttanad.

Before the introduction of land reforms in the late 1960s, land was owned by the Hindus, namely *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and the Christians namely Syrian Christians. They were the former *Jenmikal* in Kuttanad, locally known as *Thampurakkal* (*Thampuran*, in singular). The majority of the agricultural labourers came from the Pulaya caste, even though there were labourers from the Ezhava caste also. There were mainly two kinds of agricultural labourers in Kuttanad before the formation of the State of Keralam in 1956 – *paniyalukal* and *purathalukal*. *Paniyalukal* were labourers who stayed with and worked for

one landlord throughout their life. *Purathalukal*, literally meaning ‘outsiders’ were completely free casual labourers. The bulk of the labour force in Kuttanad was made up of *paniyalukal*. The landlords generally kept a number of such *paniyalukal* depending upon the extent of land cultivated by them. The *paniyal* (singular for *paniyalukal*) and his entire family were attached to a landlord and the relation mostly extended over generations. Most of them lived on the lands belonging to the landlords as *kudikidappukar* liable for eviction at the land owner’s desire. *Kudikidappukar* were labourers who lived on lands belonging to the landlords. They had their huts constructed on the bunds surrounding the paddy fields and hence they kept watch over the paddy fields, day and night. Their constant service was expected throughout the year in the cultivation of paddy.

The relation between landlords and their *paniyalukal* are part of the folklore in Kuttanad. Landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers who were Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians from Karumadi, Mithrakari, Puthukari, Ramankari, Champakulam and Mampuzhakari told me about the deep commitment of the agricultural labourers, especially the *paniyalukal*, of the past. I met my informants individually as I felt that discussing the past political, economic and social relations in groups where people from different castes and communities were present could provoke animosity and arouse conflict. This does not mean that my study area is a communally sensitive place but being a region with a past affiliated to Communism and conflicts between landlords and labourers, I did not want to take a risk. How did this deep commitment of the agricultural labourers come about? The special geography of Kuttanad contributed in hindering the inhabitants’, especially the low caste/community labourers’ accessibility to the outside world making Kuttanad their sole world. The contemptable condition created by the caste system together with the arrangement of life in the region made them completely dependent on the high caste/community landlords for survival in the region. This literally made them live at the mercy of the landlords, making them submissive and regard the landlords as their lord in every sense. This created a sense of deep allegiance among the agricultural labourers towards the landlords and the region. This in turn generated a sense of profound loyalty in the whole system that the labourers are said to have been ready to offer even their lives to protect the fields. This calls attention to the ritual of human sacrifices believed to have been practiced in Kuttanad in the past.

Human Sacrifice

Human sacrifices were considered to be the ultimate way to save the paddy fields when the bunds breached in times of heavy floods. The sacrifices were done at the breached bunds

surrounding the paddy fields. The belief was that when a human being is buried at the breached bund, the water would stop and the fields would be rescued. The mud bunds encircling the paddy fields breached very often in early days, as today. A tear-jerking moment, when all their efforts and hopes got washed away and it was at this hopeless instance that the labourers made the supreme 'sacrifice' in order to save the crop and to serve the *thampuran* (landlord). Pillai and Panikkar (1965: 118-121) wrote that such human sacrifices were made not under duress but out of a deep sense of faithfulness and devotion which the system had engendered. The readiness of the labourers to sacrifice themselves was pointed out by my informants who included Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians from the different parts of Kuttanad as the best attestation of the sense of fidelity that prevailed in the region and the strong relation the inhabitants had to the region.

It could be true that the system created a deep sense of commitment among the labourers to the landlord, the region and paddy cultivation. But paddy cultivation was the livelihood of all the inhabitants of Kuttanad and the need to protect the fields from the gushing floods was a necessity of all the inhabitants. Then why was it that it was only the labourers and the lower castes who jumped into the breached bunds to save the fields? It was also only they who were selected for the sacrifice by the landlords. The landlords and members of the high castes/communities were never sacrificed. According to informants, hundreds of labourers were sacrificed in Kuttanad. But all of them remain unknown. Sacrifices never gave any identity or recognition to the sacrificed or to their families. Hence, on the one hand, the ritual revealed deep loyalty and devotion but on the other hand, it uncovered exploitation and domination of the poor and the weak by the rich and the powerful. I realized that the land system that prevailed in Kuttanad kept the labourers subjugated.

All the pollution rules and norms, which were part of the caste system in the rest of Keralam, were applicable in Kuttanad region also. In spite of all their faithfulness, the general pattern of behaviour of the labourers, according to what I learned, had to be in such a way as to reflect their degraded status by not wearing or owning anything valuable. There were many rules, implicit and explicit, about their movements, posture, demeanor, choice of words, dress and deed that governed the behaviour of the labourers in the presence of the landlords and the high castes/communities in general which can be understood from the history written in Mateer's (1871: 42-45) work. They had to show deference, humility, and submissiveness. The labourers had to address the landlords with honourable titles like *thampuran* and address themselves and everything connected with them in degrading terms. They had to use a subservient language, notably a different linguistic form from that used by the upper castes to talk about their children,

food, house, money, wages, etc. The identity and names of labourers were unimportant. Until about forty years back, family names signified the social position and recognition of a person in Kuttanad. The family names of high castes and communities commanded respect and acknowledgment. It denoted their high caste/community lineage. Only high castes and communities had family names in those times. The low castes and communities who worked for them were known only as their workers such as Kavalackan's Pulayan, Kandakudy's Pulayan, Murickan's Pulayan and so on. This also indicates the existence of other forms of stratifications also in the society other than caste/community.

There were numerous historical instances mentioned by my informants exposing the humiliatingly degraded status the labourers had in the society but I am mentioning here only a few. The labourers were given food only outside the landlord's house. Even in the early 20th century the lower castes/communities had to dig holes in the ground to have food at the landlord's household and after having food, they had to sprinkle water over the place they sat, in order to purify the place. Their degraded status had to be reflected in their dressing as well. The labourers, even women, were not supposed to cover their body above the waist, and they had to stand in a bent posture in front of the landlords. The men were not allowed to keep moustaches. Those who violated the caste rules were subjected to physical torture, eviction from homesteads, charged with false cases, etc. The low caste/community agricultural labourers were supposed to keep away from the high castes/communities and everything related with the high castes/communities. Nobody dared to question or oppose the landlords. This continued until around the 1920s, when Communism started emerging in Kuttanad.

When my informants narrated the stories related with human sacrifices of the past, I discerned that many of the low castes like the *Ezhavanamar* and *Pulayanmar* tried to convince me how zealously dedicated their ancestors were to the region and the landlords, and how their commitment was exploited by the high castes and communities. At the same time, many of the high castes and communities like the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians often placed the emphasis on the harmonious and good relationship that existed between the landlords, labourers and the region. However, almost all of them agreed that the low castes and communities had a tough past in the region. None of my elderly informants had personally witnessed any human sacrifices but they had heard about it from their parents and grandparents, whom they said had witnessed it in person. However, ten of my informants from the agricultural community from Champakulam, Kainakari, Mampuzhakari and Ramankari who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians had witnessed accidental deaths at the bunds during breaches. From what they heard and knew, my informants narrated various

stories from the past, of labourers ‘wholeheartedly’ throwing themselves into the breaching bunds and sacrificing themselves to save the paddy fields from the rushing floods. But I often wondered whether they were really ‘wholehearted’ when they jumped to sacrifice themselves. Maybe they were jumping to escape from the miseries related with the caste and land system or maybe they were jumping to save a fellow labourer from getting sacrificed.

The stories and reasons behind human sacrifices are numerous. Women, land and surprisingly enough, participation in the activities of the Communist Party in its initial stages were mentioned by my informants who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians from Champakulam, Kavalam, Pulinkunnu, Moncompu and Thakazhi as three major reasons behind some of the human sacrifices, thus pointing at the emotional, economic and ideological reasons behind sacrifices. According to the stories they told me, some of the *thampurakkal* were very fond of certain labourer women. To get them, they used to kill the women’s men (father, brother, lover or husband) who were a hindrance to the accomplishment of their sexual desires, in the name of human sacrifice. The Pulaya and Ezhava women labourers had a deep hatred in their voice and expressions when they told this to me. Kamakshi, a Pulaya agricultural labourer woman from Champakulam came up with a further reason for the ‘sacrifice’. “Sometimes if an unfortunate labourer man fell in love with a woman from a landlord family, he also used to have a ‘heroic death’ in the bunds.” In the same way, even if the *thampurakkal* had vast stretches of land under their control, they gave only small patches to their labourers to set up their huts. Sometimes, the labourers reclaimed small bits from the rivers. If a *thampuran* felt that a labourer tried to encroach his property, then, for the next breach, he would be the target of sacrifice. Similarly, the labourers’ participation in the Communist Party and its activities was a threat to the landlords and so many of those who participated in the activities of the party were killed in the initial days and some became victims of human sacrifices. All this is apart from the numerous other undisclosed reasons, which lie buried in the bunds until now.

Whenever I had the opportunity to meet the former landlords of the past, I raised this topic. Some of them who were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians I met in Champakulam, Pulinkunnu, Moncompu, Mithrakari and Ramankari argued that these stories were cooked up by the labourers inspired by the Communist Party. However, they agreed that accidental deaths used to happen in the bunds. When some of the former landlords denied such practices and rituals, some others especially *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians I met in these villages took pride in the accusations made against their families of conducting human sacrifices, as I understood it exposed their aristocratic landlord lineage.

Whatever is the truth of these stories, human sacrifice was believed to have been a solution to a big problem of the inhabitants - the floods and the consequent breaching of bunds - and hence integral to their life and livelihood in the region. However, it is a paradox that in spite of all the numerous human sacrifices done, bunds breach even today and still no solutions have been found. However, the stories related with human sacrifice exposed commitment and loyalty on the one hand and exploitation and domination related with caste system on the other hand. I realized that the narration of these stories aroused my informants' emotions towards the region. It excited them in different ways as they tried to relate their links to the region and position them in its history.

Opposing Views

There were differences of views regarding the social relationship that existed in the past between landlords and labourers among my different informants. I note below a few statements made by four of my informants in the course of my investigation into the changing relationship between landlords and labourers which helped me to get an idea of the attitude and conflicting views of the different sections of inhabitants regarding the topic. These four informants, two male landlord-cultivators and two female agricultural labourers have been selected from four different villages. I asked the same questions to all of them and here I am noting the responses they gave. It did not seem possible or appropriate to have a group discussion with members of the agricultural community from the different castes and communities together because it would hurt and provoke caste/community sentiments. That is the reason why informants were interviewed separately. I have changed the names of my informants to protect their privacy.

Raman Pilla, was a Nayar landlord-cultivator from Thakazhi. He was fully engaged in paddy cultivation. His son is an engineer in the UK and his daughter is a Professor in one of the colleges in Kottayam. His family is considered as one of the old aristocratic families in the region. While discussing about the landlord-labourer relation in the past, he said that the *paniyal* was given the right to cultivate some land around his hut and he stayed on that piece of land without paying any rent to the landlord. When I asked the same questions to Gomathi, a seventy-eighty year old Pulaya agricultural labourer I met in the paddy fields in Mampuzhakari, she said, 'Even though the labourers lived rent-free on the landlord's land, they worked for the landlord till their backs ached from morning till night for very meagre wages.' As there were no fixed hours, according to her, the labourers' labour was expected all round the clock. The placement of the labourers' huts on the bunds surrounding the paddy fields itself was to make use of their labour, as it was a convenient location from where they could watch over the landlord's crops. Mateer (1871: 42) had described that the *Pulayanmar* resided in miserable

huts in the vicinity of the paddy fields and hence confirms this statement of Gomathi. Gomathi pointed out that even though the labourers were allowed to cultivate some land around their hut, the best produce from their small garden had to be given to the landlord as gift.

According to Raman Pillai, the landlord took care of the *paniyal* and his entire family and catered to all their needs and gave gifts to them in times of festivals and life ceremonies in their house. In his view, the landlords and their labourers lived like a family. They helped each other, served each other's needs, and could not live without each other. According to him, the labourers shared in the joys and sorrows of the landlord and his family and vice-versa. He pointed out that when there was heavy work, the *paniyalukal* were expected to work for longer hours but they were paid for such extra work. But according to Gomathi, as there were no fixed hours of work, the labourers were not allowed to leave the landlords' houses without finishing the assigned work which was always some heavy work that made them work till late night. The extra payment they got was very meagre when compared to the work they did. She told me that she and her siblings often slept with empty stomachs waiting for their parents to return from the landlord's house with the few grains of rice they got for the day. The extra payment was entirely at the discretion of the landlord.

Panikkar is a Nayar landlord-cultivator in Pulinkunnu. He is a relative of one of my friends in BCM College in Kottayam. I met him in his house for an interview. He is fully engaged in paddy cultivation. His daughter is a bank manager in Thiruvalla, a neighbouring town to Kuttanad. While talking about the landlord-labourer relation of the past he said, 'The landlords gave generous loans to their labourers in times of their difficulties which they could pay back as and when they liked.' Devayani, a seventy-nine year old Ezhava agricultural labourer I met in Champakulam said, 'Loans and gifts from the landlords made the labourers feel more indebted to their landlords since they could not repay them from their meagre incomes.' In her opinion, it only enslaved them more. Panikkar said that in the times of having *paniyalukal*, there were no problems of unemployment because during the off-seasons, the labourers were employed in the maintenance of bunds, the levelling of fields by filling it up with new clay, digging pits for planting coconut trees, maintaining coconut gardens on filled up bunds, etc.

Most of the other landlords I met who belonged to the old aristocratic families who were Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians in Champakulam, Mampuzhakari and Pulinkunnu had the impression that the labourers were happy and content and would have remained so even today, if it were not for the Communists who had been misleading them. However, not a single agricultural labourer from the old labourer castes and communities who

was interviewed expressed such a view regarding the old system. Every labourer expressed the view that it was a system that enslaved, oppressed, exploited and degraded them. While the landlords were nostalgic about the old system, the labourers had no regrets that it had changed drastically and fast. A visible change in the relationship between the landlords and their *paniyalukal* occurred with the coming of *purathalukal*, that is, the casual labourers. Now I turn to them and the changes that followed.

The arrival of *Purathalukal* or the Casual Labourers

I started searching for the circumstances that led to the change in the relationship between landlords and labourers. A research into the social, political and economic history of the region with the help of historical sources and accounts of my informants showed that the arrival of *purathalukal* from distant places, who had no loyalties to anyone and the region, changed the prevailing social relationship. It was from the second half of the 19th century, with largescale land reclamations and commercialization of agriculture that capitalism became dynamic in Kuttanad. During this period, the land relations and mode of production started to change, which were the impacts of institutional reforms of the Travancore State as well as the processes that were happening at the world level. All these had its impact on the landlord-labourer relations in Kuttanad. With the expansion of agriculture from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, more labourers were required to fulfil the various cultivation operations. The *paniyalukal* were not enough and so the landlords had to employ *purathalukal* who were paid wages on a daily basis.

The *purathalukal* came from adjoining areas like Kottayam, Changanassery Mannar, Mavelikkara, Chengannur, Ambalapuzha, Haripad etc. at the time of harvest, the time when the maximum number of labourers were required. They stayed in temporarily erected sheds until the end of the harvest, when they returned to their native places. These labourers were mostly *Ezhavanmar* and Latin Catholics. They moved from one *padashekharam* to the other, which was facilitated by the slightly different timings of sowing and harvesting operations. Even though they were labourers who had the liberty to work for whomsoever they liked, various aspects of their working conditions such as hours of work, periods of rest, wage rates, mode of payment of wages, amount of work, etc. were entirely decided by the employing landlord. They were paid in cash or in kind at a rate decided by the landlord, who had the right to employ whomsoever he liked, to rebuke them or even beat them for negligence in work or misbehavior.

As the practice of employing *purathalukal* increased, the landlords gradually realized that the shortage of local labourers during the peak harvest season could be compensated by the inflow

of migrant labourers every year, so it was quite unnecessary to retain a huge labour force permanently as attached labourers and preferred instead to use *purathalukal*. The pace of transition from attached labour system to a new system of casual labour gained momentum with the spread of unionism among agricultural labourers as shown by Thomas (2002: 29). This period also indicated a transition from labour-intensive methods to capital-intensive ones like for example, the arrival of oil engines displacing labour from the water-wheels to de-water the paddy fields.

As this transition period is closely connected with the spread of Communism in Kuttanad, I turn to that topic to demonstrate how it influenced the relation between landlords and labourers. It has to be noted that there were many other social, economic and political changes also happening parallel to the coming of casual labourers, and the rise and spread of Communism that influenced this change in the relationship. For example the role played by the missionaries, the education of the different castes and communities, the achievement of government employment, socio-religious reform movements, land reforms, migration to places abroad, etc. Together with all this, Communism also played a significant role in the transformation. I am placing my focus on Communism in my narrative here only because Kuttanad being the cradle of Communism and as most of my informants belonged to the Communist Party, their narratives and line of thought regarding change was related more to Communism and I am just following their thread of thought.

Rise and Spread of Communism

My visits to the Communist Party office in Alappuzha was highly informative for me. I received records related with the rise of Communism. The conversations that emerged with the party members I met there also informed me about the spread of Communism. Besides, my chat with the inhabitants living in the different villages and towns of Kuttanad during my usual strolls in the region also expanded my knowledge. In addition, several books I came across during my research period about the political history of the region were also of help. Alappuzha town, in the west of Kuttanad, a predominant port and industrial centre of Travancore was one of the early centres of Communist activities in the State. From Alappuzha, the Communist volunteers carried out the ideological propaganda to the surrounding areas including Kuttanad from the mid-1930s as shown by Cherian (1986), Kamalasanan (1993) and Thomas (2002). The labourers in Kuttanad responded to the Communist Party of India's call for organization and the Travancore Agricultural Labourer's Union was registered as a trade union in 1938. It was the agricultural labourers near Alappuzha who were first organized and the union and its message spread to all the villages of Kuttanad within a few years. Tharamangalam (1981: 56-

57) stated that eviction was a common punishment given to the agricultural labourers who were *kudikidappukar* in the landlord's property, for joining labour movement in the initial stages of the 1940s and even of the early 1950s.

Different inhabitants I met had different opinions as to why Communism and unionism spread so fast among the agricultural labourers in Kuttanad. Seventy-one landlords and landlord-cultivators from Mampuzhakari, Champakulam, Mithrakari, Puthukari, Moncompu and Pulinkunnu who were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanamar* and Syrian Christians blamed Communism for ruining the 'good' relationship that existed between landlords and labourers, thus leading to the dismantling of the entire paddy cultivation and the region. Among my informants was Radhakrishnan, a Nayar landlord-cultivator from Champakulam. I have changed his name for privacy reasons. His family had vast stretches of paddy fields that were grabbed and distributed by the land reforms. He is a family friend and that is how I contacted him. Criticising the Communist Party he said, 'Inspired by the Communist doctrines of class struggle and class war, the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad began to consider the traditional landlords and the agricultural entrepreneurs who reclaimed paddy fields from the waterbodies and provided them employment as their class enemies.'

Thankamani, a Pulaya agricultural labourer I met in Mithrakari and thirty-three other agricultural labourers, cultivator-labourers and cultivators from Mithrakari, Champakulam, Ramankari and Karumadi had a different view.⁴⁶ They were *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians. I met most of them in the paddy fields in these villages and some others in their houses. According to their view, with the spread of Communist ideology, the agricultural labourers became aware of their rights, about which they were ignorant until then. The support given by the Communist leaders and volunteers gave the agricultural labourers the courage to stand up against the exploitation of the landlords. I met Padmanabhan, a politician from the Communist Party of India who is from Chennankari on an Alappuzha-Changanassery bus. He was sitting next to me and when we started a conversation, I brought up the topic of the rise of Communism. He told me that even though the landlords exploited the labourers to the maximum, they knew that they could not do anything without the help of the labourers. On the other hand, the labourers were never aware of this or about their value. Let me include here what Shashi, another politician from the Communist Party of India whom I met at a political gathering in Ramankari remarked. He said, 'The revolt of the agricultural labourers was not spoon-fed into their mouths by anyone. It developed by itself.' According to him, it is the suffering they underwent under the landlords for centuries that made them revolt. As my

⁴⁶ Thankamani is a female agricultural labourer.

fieldwork proceeded I became more and more aware of my informants' ideological conflict regarding their social and political history. Hence, my informants had divergent opinions regarding the spread of Communism in the region. However, they all pointed at the change that was happening in the region, and in the relationship between the inhabitants.

Since the 1950s, the mutual distrust and hatred that emerged between the landlords and labourers resulted in frequent and violent clashes between the two in different parts of Kuttanad. Ultimately, in 1957, the Communist Party came to power in Keralam forming the first ever democratically elected Communist Government in India. This was considered as a great victory and achievement by the labourers in Kuttanad. The early Communist leaders of the labourers were persons belonging to the higher castes/communities and rich families. It is they who organized the agricultural labourers as part of their overall political strategy. They were more refined in their dealings with the former landlords with whom they had class and kinship affinities. However, the Communist Party split in 1964 into the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In contrast to the previous leaders, the new ones belonged to lower castes/communities with their kith and kin working in the fields. Except for trade union and political party work, they themselves were labourers living in huts built on others' lands. The landlords responded to the labourers' movement by organizing themselves, under the banner of the Kuttanad Karshaka Sangam (Kuttanad Agriculturists Association). However, compared to the labourers's movement, the Sangam was weak. Later, they supported the Kerala Congress, representing the interests of the propertied class in Keralam. Since then, the LDF and the UDF alternated in power in Keralam.

Generally, in my study area, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) are regarded as the party of the labourers and the Indian National Congress, Kerala Congress and the Kerala Congress (Mani) are considered as the parties of the (former) landlords. Each time when the LDF comes to power, it is a great setback to the former high caste/community landlords who are *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. For them, it symbolizes the triumph of the lower castes/communities and labourers over them. It gives the impression of the labourers ruling the landlords or the lower castes/communities ruling the higher castes/communities. I am not stating that everyone in Kuttanad has this feeling but I am only stating a general feeling, which is present among the inhabitants, which I have noticed being a native of this region. Even the low castes/community labourers who are *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians I understood, have similar convictions. Many of my low caste informants from the Pulaya and Ezhava castes in the various villages and towns I visited considered it triumphant to get employment in

government services more than many of my high caste/community informants. Apart from the benefits of government jobs, I realized there was also a hint of a feeling of superiority and pride among them in being a part of the government or the rulers. It was also the same with regard to party/political work among the low castes/communities and labourers. It bestowed in them a power to control and dominate even the higher castes/community landlords. It was an embarrassment and a disgrace for many of the former high caste/community landlords to make negotiations and dealings with their former labourers from the low castes and communities, to do paddy cultivation in the fields formerly and fully owned by them but now which is under the possession of the labourers, who are the new landlords. It was inappropriate for many to treat their former labourers as equal in status and power.

Following the formation of the Communist Government in 1957, several events took place that further widened the gap between the former landlords and the labourers. For example, the implementation of the Land Reforms in the 1960s, migration of inhabitants to the Gulf and abroad from the 1970s and the flow of remittances, attainment of higher education and government and secular jobs, the new economic policies and the resultant changes, etc., drastically transformed the relationship between the former landlords and labourers in Kuttanad.

Further Changes in the Relationship

Another topic that I would like to mention in connection with change in the relation between inhabitants is the transformation of the concepts *janmi*, *muthalali* (capitalist) and *agola muthalali* (global capitalist). Connected to these are the concepts *agolavathkaranam* (globalization), *agola muthalalthwam* (global capitalism) and *agola muthalali* (global capitalist). These notions can be seen sprinkled here and there in the statements of some of my informants.

When the *jenmi* system prevailed in Kuttanad, that is, until around mid-20th century, the high caste/community landlords of vast stretches of paddy fields were referred to as *thampuran* by the low caste/community labourers. *Thampurakkal* (plural for *thampuran*) were mainly *Namboodirimar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. Those Tamil *Brahmananmar* who owned vast stretches of paddy land were also referred to as *thampurakkal*. The labourers who called these landlords, *thampuran*, were mainly *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar* who were referred to as *Kudiyar* (tenant). With the spread of Communism and its ideology among the labourers, they began to look upon the *thampuran* as their class enemy. Gradually with the influence of Communism, the *thampuran* (*janmi*) became *muthalali* (capitalist) denoting the bourgeois and

the labourer became *thozhilali* (worker) signifying the proletariat. The notions of *muthalali* and *thozhilali* dominated the scene until the 1990s when the Government of Kerala opened the doors to neoliberalism, privatization, globalization, etc. From then onwards, together with *muthalali* and *thozhilali*, the notions of *agolavathkaranam* (globalization), *agola muthalalithwam* (global capitalism) and *agola muthalali* (global capitalist) began to be heard. At the time of my fieldwork all these terms were rampant. I shall now write about the context of its usage in my study area.

Muthalali and Muthalalithwam

The connotation of the concepts *muthalali* (capitalist) and *muthalalithwam* (capitalism) that prevailed at the time of the spread of Communism had changed at the time of my fieldwork. I realised that for both the rich and the poor landlords and landlord-cultivators who were *Namboodiramar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians, the new entrepreneurs in Kerala who were reclaiming and encroaching the land and water for new ventures other than paddy cultivation were *muthalalikal* (plural of *muthalali*). Their nature of using the power of money and influence for mere profit, with no regard for the inhabitants and the environment was *muthalalithwam* (capitalism). For the cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers who were poor *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Catholics, both the new entrepreneurs and the rich landlords and landlord-cultivators who were *Namboodiramar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians were *muthalalikal*. In their observation, these *muthalalikal* were rich, owned more land, could survive even without doing paddy cultivation and had power and influence to get things done in their favour. The conflicts and quarrels between them over wages and other matters related to the region, increased the gulf between the two.

Agolavathkaranam (Globalization) and *Agola Muthalali* (Global Capitalist)

It was with the opening up of the economy and the liberalization of the economic policies in Kerala after the 1990s that concepts like *agolavathkaranam*, *agola muthalalithwam* and *agola muthalali* emerged in Kuttanad. The multinational corporations and companies that had political and economic transactions in Kerala and India were termed as *agola muthalalikal* (global capitalists) by the inhabitants.⁴⁷ The involvement of national and international corporate

⁴⁷ The popular multinational companies in India at the time of my fieldwork were the Microsoft Corporation, Nokia Corporation, Nestle, Coca Cola, Procter and Gamble, IBM or International Business Machines Corporation, PepsiCo, Sony Corporation, Citigroup, etc. Some US companies in India at the time of my fieldwork were Agilent, Agro Tech, American Express, Amway, Avaya, Caltex, Caterpillar, Cisco, Citigroup, Coca Cola, Cognizant, Colgate Palmolive, Cummins, Discovery, Dupont, Eli Lilly, Emerson Electric, Federal Express, Ford, Franklin Templeton, General Motors, Gillette, Intel, Johnson & Johnson, Kellogg India, Kimberly Clark, Kodak,

sector in land reclamation and encroachment projects threatening the ecology of the region and the life and livelihood of the inhabitants is a reason why these entrepreneurs began to be looked upon as enemies and a danger. The Communist history of the region could be a reason why they started calling the national and international entrepreneurs *agola muthalikal*. Many inhabitants considered changes in the landscapes and land use pattern leading to urbanization as signs of the growth of *muthalalithwam* (capitalism) and *agola muthalalithwam* (global capitalism).

I wanted to follow the thoughts of my informants regarding the above concepts that were in use in my study area. Therefore I raised them while talking to the people I met in the different villages. One morning in December, Radhakrishnan, a Nayar landlord-cultivator and I were walking on the bunds around his paddy fields in Champakulam. He said, 'The bund is the wall that separates and protects our paddy fields from the floods, our profit from loss, and our lives from death. Similarly, there should be a bund that separates and protects Kuttanad from capitalist exploitations. Breaches happen in the bunds. Then water pours in destroying our land, our environment, our lives, our efforts and our dreams. Water is important for paddy cultivation but excess water will damage the crop and the cultivator. Similarly, contact with the outside world is good for the region and the inhabitants but such connections must not lead to the ruin and disappearance of our own region.' Radhakrishnan was a person who played an active role in almost all the local meetings and discussions about environment conservation in Kuttanad. It was when I was asking him about what he thought about *agolavathkaranam* and the changes in general in Kuttanad that he put forward this metaphor.

Sadhanandan was an Ezhava teacher from Champakulam. I met him in a library in the village. While talking about the impact of *agolavathkaranam* he said that as a result of the new liberalized regime, the Government withdrew from welfare activities and reduced its spending in the social sector. Instead, private initiatives were promoted in almost all areas of development. He noted that as the aim of the private sector is not service but profit, such services become accessible only to the rich. He told me about the reduction in the government spending on education in Kerala as part of this change. The number of government and aided schools registered a decline, but the number of private schools in the form of unaided schools and self-financing institutions went up. However, in the course of my fieldwork I realized that not all my informants had clarity in what they meant by *agolavathkaranam* and *agola muthalali*. It was mainly the rich entrepreneurs who were behind the big budget development projects in

McDonalds, Metlife India, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, New York Life, Ogilvy and Mather, Oracle, Pepsico, Pfizer, Pizza Hut, Sun Microsystems, Texas, Tecumseh, Timex, Tyco, Visteon, Whirlpool and Xerox Modicorp.

the region that they often referred to as *agola muthalali*. Whenever I discussed matters related with education, unemployment, development and labour shortage also my informants mentioned about *agola muthalalikal*. The rise of new occupations related with neoliberal policies in the various parts of the country are often associated with *agolavathkaranam* (globalization) and *agola muthalalithwam* (global capitalism) by informants.

These and Radhakrishnan's statement points at the ambiguity prevalent in peasant agriculture about which Chatterjee (2007: 16-17) wrote. He pointed out that as far as peasant agriculture is concerned, things are much less clearly developed. Even though small peasant agriculture is thoroughly enmeshed in market connections, the peasants feel threatened by the market. Hence, there is, in particular, an unfamiliarity with, and deep suspicion of, corporate organizations. Peasants appear to be far less able to deal with the uncertainties of the market than they are able to secure governmental benefits. Peasants feel that the markets for these commercial crops are manipulated by large mysterious forces that are entirely beyond their control. Radhakrishnan's statement is also similar to what Appadurai (2000a: 32) wrote, 'For polities of smaller scale, there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby. One man's imagined community is another man's political prison.' However, I realized that this ambiguity and the fear that developed out of it united the agricultural community. Hence, in spite of being highly heterogeneous and having occasional conflicts, they unanimously considered the *muthalali* and the *agola muthalali* who were transforming the physical landscape of Kuttanad as a major threat to them and to the region and opposed the non-agricultural developments.

The Current Unity in a Disputed Landscape

Since early childhood, I have seen paddy being cultivated, season after season. However, it was when I started my life as a researcher and took Kuttanad region itself as my study area that I noticed in detail the uniqueness of cultivating paddy in the region and how much effort the agricultural community invested in order to produce rice below sea level. In addition to participant observation, my conversations with people belonging to both agricultural and non-agricultural community in the different villages and towns of Kuttanad assisted me in grasping the unique cultivation practices followed in Kuttanad. My exploration into the cultivation practices uncovered the unity that was necessary for cultivating paddy in Kuttanad. On the first day of my fieldwork at Kumarakom, I introduced myself as a researcher interested in studying Kuttanad and its paddy cultivation to those who were working in the paddy fields there. Identifying the distinctiveness of the geography of the region, those who were there asked me to look at the surrounding waterbodies that flowed above the fields where I stood. Pachan, an

agricultural labourer from Kumarakom said, ‘You are standing on a rare piece of land!’⁴⁸ Even though in the later stages of my research, I heard several people speaking about the unique landscape of Kuttanad, the agricultural community seemed to be more proud than anyone, about it. My informants included mainly *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians. Underscoring the risk involved in their occupation, Joppan, a Latin Catholic agricultural labourer from the group said, ‘Paddy cultivation in Kuttanad is described as a gamble with the monsoons.’⁴⁹ Why is it risky? What is the risk?

Two monsoons flood Kuttanad every year – regularly in June-July during southwest monsoon (*karkidakam*) and rarely in October-November during northeast monsoon (*thulam*). Paddy is cultivated even at the time of the northeast monsoon, the most risky time for doing cultivation. One to three crops are raised annually in Kuttanad. The first crop called *Viruppu* is grown from April-May to September-October; the second crop known as *Mundakan* is grown from September-October to December-January and the third crop called *Punja* is grown from December-January to March-April. The crops raised during the monsoon seasons (June to December/*Viruppu* and *Mundakan*) run the risk of floods due to breaches in the bunds. In places where the flood level is not very high, an occasional second crop is attempted on a very limited scale during the southwest monsoon period. This crop is always at stake and is successful only during the years of moderate rainfall. No crop can be grown in the *kayal nilam*, that is, the paddy fields reclaimed from the Vembanad *Kayal*, during the second monsoon season when inland water floods the lakes. The summer *punja* crop (January to May) suffer from lack of freshwater for irrigation as the surface water become saline. For the summer crop, sowing is usually done soon after the monsoon and before the end of February when there is no risk of salinity.

Cultivating paddy in such a risk-ridden region consists of a long array of operations that require the co-operation, collaboration and support from different quarters both inside and outside the paddy field. Cultivation has never been a one-man show in Kuttanad. The different stages of cultivation, comprising the repair of outer and inner bunds, dewatering, ploughing, clearing and levelling of fields, sowing, weeding, application of pesticides and finally harvesting entailed the effort of so many people. With a common historical background of concord and conflict, the agrarian relationship I saw at the time of my fieldwork was one in which those engaged in paddy cultivation collaborated and worked together in an atmosphere of tension and strife. It seemed like a mixture of cooperation and conflict.

⁴⁸ Pachan is a male agricultural labourer.

⁴⁹ Joppan is a male agricultural labourer.

The agricultural community includes people from different religions, castes, communities, political parties, labour/trade unions, social and political organizations who have different perspectives regarding the affairs in the region. Some of the cultivators produced only for the market, others produced partly for market and partly for subsistence and a few others only for their own subsistence. I learned that nowadays, in order to reduce the cost of cultivation, many inhabitants who are involved in paddy cultivation engage in the different cultivation activities by themselves irrespective of castes and communities. Hence, the old caste/community divisions in performing the different works connected with cultivation is gradually fading away. Therefore, it was possible to find Syrian Christians, low caste converted Christians, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar* as landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and even agricultural labourers and engaging in the various activities of cultivation. The Syrian Christians and *Nayanmar* worked only in their own fields. Some among the Latin Catholics and *Ezhavanmar* worked only in their own fields while some others from this caste and community worked in both their own field and in others' fields. *Pulayanmar* worked in both their own fields and in others' fields. This does not mean that everyone from these castes and communities worked in the fields. The rich from these castes and communities abstained from working in the fields mainly due to social stigma and also to avoid disputes with labour/trade unions. Instead, they leased out their fields. However, some new rich from these castes and communities were seen working in the fields. But I did not find any rich or poor *Namboodirimar* or Tamil *Brahmananmar* working in the fields. However, the majority of the hired labourers were *Pulayanmar* and to a lesser degree, *Ezhavanmar*.

The agricultural labourers I met were literate and conscious of their rights and grievances and were determined to extract better terms and conditions from those who hired them and the government. All of them were part of labour unions, especially related with the LDF. The labourers had fixed hours of work. A couple of times I observed verbal quarrels over wages between landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, labourers and their unions in different villages. In all my personal and separate talks with landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators and labourers, they were complaining and blaming each other for different reasons. Landlords, landlord-cultivators and even the labourers I met in Champakulam, Mampuzhakari and Ramankari said that almost all activities related with paddy cultivation are now carried out according to the dictates of the labour union. The voice of the landlords and landlord-cultivators, especially that of the former landlords is no longer heard anywhere when it comes to agricultural demands. Sadhasivan, an Ezhava landlord-cultivator from Chempumpuram, told me that currently, the wages are fixed and periodically revised by labour unions without even

consulting the landlords and landlord-cultivators.⁵⁰ However, I observed that in spite of the increase in power of the labourers, their economic situation was not so high in the social hierarchy.

Keeping the conflicts and tensions aside, what I observed on the other hand was a great cooperation between those engaged in cultivation. Paddy fields lie far and wide in my study area, stretching across kilometres and kilometres without a single shade to offer relief to anyone working in the fields. Coconut trees and banana trees are grown only on the outer bunds, which lie far away from the core working area. Those working in the paddy fields, who included agricultural labourers, cultivator-labourers, cultivators and even many of the landlord-cultivators I met in the different villages of Kuttanad stood in the hot sun and the heavy rain to cultivate paddy. The landlords who only leased out their lands almost never came to the paddy fields. There were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians among them. Most of them were not interested in paddy cultivation and/or had other means of income than paddy. But the landlord-cultivators who leased out their fields but were actively engaged in agriculture or did cultivation by themselves often came to the fields. They included *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Catholics. All the others, that is, the cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers were always present in the paddy fields and they included *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. They all worked together under the harsh conditions in the paddy fields and this I understood created a distinctive unity among them. The involvement of the different castes and communities in the various operations related with paddy cultivation more than before, I believe is also contributing in easing the tension in the paddy fields.

Around forty years back, before the arrival of harvest machines and combined-harvestors, when paddy was threshed manually, some of the former landlords used to sit for shade on *maadangal* (plural for *maadam*) built from wood and coconut tree leaves in the *kalam*, a plot of land near the outer bunds, where the paddy was threshed. However, they sat like this only during the peak harvest seasons, when the number of labourers and amount of work were more. These *maadangal* were not placed in the paddy fields for the landlords to sit and relax and supervise the labourers but only in *kalangal* (plural for *kalam*) where manual threshing was done. In large *padashekarangal* (group of paddy fields) these *kalangal* were located far away from the core working areas making it impossible for the landlords to sit and supervise the work. Nowadays threshing and winnowing are done by machines in the paddy fields itself and hence there is no

⁵⁰ Sadhasivan is a male landlord-cultivator.

need of any *kalam*. Moreover, as more and more fields are leased out by the landlords, especially the former landlords, they do not have to come to the fields to supervise the work. Hence, *maadangal* have disappeared some forty to fifty years back in my study area. Now some of the former landlord households have placed these *maadangal* as a novelty in their gardens. Some of the resorts and homestays also have them in their gardens as relics of the past Kuttanadan culture. Those engaged in cultivation at the time of my fieldwork stood in the fields without any shade and shelter. Many of the landlord-cultivators and cultivators who supervised the work in the fields held an umbrella to protect themselves from the heat of the sun. The labourers also had umbrellas attached to their heads. However, I always felt that the heat is so fierce in the open paddy fields that the umbrellas did not give anyone any relief. Even though occasional quarrels and conflicts related with political and economic issues happened now and then and here and there, between the rich landlords, landlord-cultivators, absentee landlords and their hired labourers and unions, those whom I saw present in the fields were very helpful, easygoing and sociable towards each other, irrespective of castes and communities. Sometimes, the landlords and labourers made fun of each other, citing topics related with the old *jenmi* system. Hence, what I observed in my field was a combination of tension and cooperation.

Now I shall write in detail the different stages of paddy cultivation I observed, which necessitated the cooperation of everyone engaged in the cultivation of paddy and which brought them all together in the field. I grasped that cultivating paddy requires great experience, attention and skill, right from the time of the selection of good seeds to the harvest. I spend a lot of time in the paddy fields in the different villages of Kuttanad, observing cultivation and talking with the cultivators on different topics related to my research and asking questions related with the processes of cultivation. What is given below is a combination of my observation and, accounts and recollections of my informants.

Making and Maintaining Outer and Inner Bunds

Paddy is grown in small fields called *paadangal*. *Paadangal* is the plural for *paadam*, which means paddy field. A group of *paadangal* is called *paadashekharam*. The plural for *paadashekharam* is *padashekharangal*. In order to do cultivation, first, outer bunds have to be erected around the *paadashekharangal* and then inner bunds called *idavarambu* across the *paadangal* where paddy is to be cultivated. This process called *varambu kuthal* in Malayalam is done by men. This I observed was a neck and back breaking job requiring the labourers to bend over for hours. These small bunds, one-foot high and 1-1½ feet wide are made from the mud taken from the field itself. This is done every season before cultivation starts. In the fields I visited, the cultivators had to bear the expenses of the annual repair of inner and outer bunds

and my informants complained that this increased the cost of cultivation. Permanent outer bunds made of stones were being used in more and more fields at the time of my fieldwork, in spite of differences of opinion regarding their effect on the fragile ecology. However, the entire low-lying areas in Kuttanad remained submerged under water throughout the year. After maintaining the outer and inner bunds, the next operation is dewatering.

Dewatering

Electric pump sets are now used in all fields, large and small, for dewatering. The number and capacity of pump sets varied according to the size of the fields. Dewatering is done by men. Some of the rich landlords and landlord-cultivators owned their own pumps. Some of them rented it out to the contractors. There were also pumping contractors who owned their own pumps. At the time of my fieldwork, dewatering was entrusted to private contractors who had won the contract through auction. After the auction is settled, the contractors entrusted the work to skilled workers. The government provided some funding related with dewatering to ease the paddy cultivators. The contract was not given on the basis of any caste/community. The task was allotted according to interest and talent. Hence, there were Pulaya, Ezhava, Nayar, Syrian Christian and low caste converted Christian contractors and workers engaged in dewatering functions. It was possible to see Ezhava or Syrian Christian contractors dewatering the paddy fields belonging to other castes and communities. Power cuts and mechanical problems with electric pumps, which were not always in good condition, used to cause havoc during cultivation, which extended the sphere of cooperation required.

Ploughing

In almost all the fields I visited, the cultivators used tractors to plough their fields. The government as well as private persons own tractors. The private persons included rich landlords and landlord-cultivators who use it for the ploughing of their own fields. They also rented it out to others. Apart from the landlords and landlord-cultivators, there were also private tractor owners who rented their tractors to others. My informants preferred tractors owned by private persons, as those owned by the government are usually not in good condition. There were people skilled in using tractors and power tillers who did the ploughing. This work was done by men. When the field was ready for ploughing, the landlord-cultivators or the cultivators approached the Punja Special Officer or the private tractor owners who arranged tractors and ploughmen. I came across *Pulayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians who worked as ploughmen. However, in some of the fields like those in Ramankari, animal ploughing is still partly practised to support those still engaged in that occupation and mainly as a compromise with the militancy of labour unions in which such

ploughmen are members. However, quarrels often happen between landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators and ploughmen, as the former prefer machines to ploughmen, since it make the work faster, cheaper and without conflicts over wages. In spite of quarrels, they supported and depended on each other and cultivated paddy. Following ploughing is the clearing and levelling of fields.

Clearing and Levelling of Fields

The paddy fields are cleared by removing rotten weeds and other waste materials. This is done mainly by women but in some fields in Champakulam and Puthukari I saw men also engaged in clearing the fields. After clearing, the fields are levelled using tractors with special apparatuses called *kalappa* attached to it. Levelling is done by skilled men. I met Ezhava, Pulaya, Syrian Christian and low caste converted Christian men engaged in this operation. Both the government and private persons own the tractors used for levelling. As in the case of ploughing, after the fields are cleared, landlord-cultivators and cultivators approached the Punja Special Officer or the private tractor owners for getting tractors and workers skilled in levelling the fields. Even though more men and machines are seen now doing most of the cultivation operations, women are always found in the fields clearing the weeds or transplanting. After clearing and levelling the fields, sowing is done next.

Sowing

When Devayani, an eighty year old Ezhava agricultural labourer from Champakulam talked about the sowing methods used some decades back in the region, I could comprehend the joy and respect they had for cultivating paddy. Her narration conveyed the great care the agricultural community took to produce paddy. According to her, before the Green Revolution, most cultivators kept a portion of their produce of each season as seeds for the next season. Extreme care had been taken in the preparation as well as preservation of seeds. The seeds were dried in sunlight for six consecutive days and in order to ensure uniform dryness, the seeds spread on mats were stirred at regular intervals. On the seventh day, the already dried seeds were once again exposed to sunlight for a short while for final drying. And finally, the seeds were stored in baskets in moisture-proof granaries called *pathayam* until the next crop season. The *thala pulayan*, the leader of the workers was in charge of seed preparation. Cleanliness and purity were given utmost importance during the whole process of seed preparation, as paddy and its cultivation were considered sacred not only by the agricultural community but by the entire population. Menstruating women were not allowed to handle seeds and the man in charge of drying seeds was not allowed to leave the spot and interact with women or have sexual relations until the prepared seeds were stored. This was the past.

At the time of my fieldwork, in all the fields I visited, traditional and native varieties of seeds had given way to high-yielding varieties that were developed during the Green Revolution. By the 1980s, seed varieties like Karthika, Makom, Jyothy, Mattatriveni, Annapurna, Revathy, Remanika, Krishnanjana, Prathyaasa, Bhadra, Asha, Pavizham, Remya, Kanakom, Jaya, Sabari, Bharathy, Renjini, Pavithra, Panchami, Uma and Gouri had become popular. Majority of the cultivators I met used Jyothi and Uma, which were supplied by the krishi bhavans.⁵¹ Sowing was done only by men in the fields I visited. Devayani, the agricultural labourer from Champakulam pointed out that over the years the quality of sowing has considerably deteriorated due to the lack of skilled labourers. There was grief in the tone of my informants I met in the paddy fields in Champakulam together with Devayani when they talked about the loss of the native seed varieties, which many among them said was the secret behind the health of the old generation. According to Devayani, even though the new seed varieties may give more yield, the quality difference in taste is incomparable. Sowing is followed by transplanting.

Transplanting

The cultivators I met in the paddy fields in Mithrakari brought my attention to the current absence of skilled labourers engaged in sowing. Forty years back, the skilled labourers dispersed the seeds in a very even manner throughout the field. Due to absence of such skilled workers, seeds are getting unevenly distributed resulting in seeds falling in excess amounts in some parts of the field. This was adversely affecting crop productivity and increasing the cost of production. Therefore, excess seedlings have to be transplanted to the sparsely growing parts of the field. This was done by the women labourers. After transplanting, the next operation is weeding.

Weeding

Wetland weeds were causing severe problems to paddy cultivation in all the paddy fields I visited.⁵² The weeds have to be removed at least three times in a crop season. The first weeding is done along with transplanting. The second weeding is done within six to eight weeks after the sowing, and the third weeding is done in between ten to twelve weeks after the sowing. All this required labourers and hence was a problem in times of labour shortage. In this context, instead of manual weeding, chemical weedicides were increasingly being applied in most of the fields I visited. Even though, this practice of using chemical weedicides reduced the menace

⁵¹ The seeds are prepared by government agencies like Kerala State Seed Development Authority and National Seeds Corporation.

⁵² *Kavitta, pola, kannikapullu*, African *payal* and *kulavazha* are the different kinds of waterweeds I found in Kuttanad.

of weeds in recent years, the soil is getting damaged beyond control. Cultivators applied insecticides in their fields three to four times during a single crop season at regular intervals, which indicated the amount of poisonous chemicals that went into the region. Leaf rollers, rice stem borers, rice bugs and rats are the important pests that destroy the paddy crops. It was men who were found applying weedicides in most of the fields I visited. However, in some fields in Champakulam, Mithrakari, Ramankari, etc. I found women engaged in manual weeding.

While I was talking to the cultivators in the paddy fields in Kavalam, Kathu, a Pulaya agricultural labourer narrated the earlier method of weed control by the cultivators using water.⁵³ Ten to fifteen days after sowing, they used to open the sluices in the outer bunds and allow the outside water to enter the fields in a controlled manner until the seedlings of paddy and weeds were fully immersed. The water in the field was kept at that level for a few days and then bailed out. By this process, the seedlings of weeds decayed while the seedlings of paddy survived. Shanthamma, an Ezhava agricultural labourer who was present in the field recounted that prior to the introduction of chemical pesticides, in order to destroy the caterpillars of leaf rollers and rice stem borers, cultivators used to raise the water level in the pest affected fields up to the tips of the paddy plants.⁵⁴ In order to escape from the slowly rising water level, worms would move upwards and finally float. At this stage, labourers used to collect the floating worms using baskets and take them to the outer bunds where they were destroyed. According to Shanthamma, this neither damaged the land nor the environment. The next operation is manuring.

Manuring

Almost all the cultivators I met used chemical fertilizers like urea, factumfos and potash in their fields. The quality of the chemical fertilizers differed according to the different companies. Almost no one used organic manure like cow dung, which was the main manure before the Green Revolution. I found only men engaged in applying chemical manures. The final operation is harvesting.

Harvesting

Even though each phase of paddy cultivation is important and needs great care and attention, harvest is the most auspicious event for the agricultural community in general. All the efforts in the previous phases are for the harvest day. A good harvest depends largely on the timely activities at the different stages of cultivation, which begins right from the selection of good

⁵³ Kathu is a female agricultural labourer.

⁵⁴ Shanthamma is a female agricultural labourer.

seeds up to the harvest. One mistake or a mishap or a delay in operation in any of the stages can bring great loss during harvest. Natural calamities like floods, untimely rain – short/acute, pests, etc. also affect the output of the harvest. Things often go wrong and people have to bear the consequences. Harvest was always a day of great tension and stress for all my cultivator informants, as their life until the next crop season depended on the harvest. While I was in Chennankari, Mani, a Pulaya landlord-cultivator who was getting everything ready for the harvest in his field said, ‘Profit and loss follow one after the other here. If one has a loss this time, next time he will make profit.’ I realized many times during the course of my research that it was this optimism that carried forward the paddy cultivation in Kuttanad.

In the past, the various harvesting operations were done manually and required the hands of a huge army of labourers who were plenty at that time. At the time of my fieldwork, most of the work related with harvest was done by machines but the availability of machines depended on various factors.⁵⁵ Other than machines, the rest of the work related with harvest is done by men with assistance from women. After harvest, the paddy is filled in sacks by women. Then it is weighed and carried by headload workers, who are men, to the canoes or trucks, depending on the location of paddy fields. If the paddy field is located in the middle of a large *padashekhar* (a group of paddy fields) far away from the roads, the headload workers carry it to the roads, or the canoes, which will transport it to the roads where trucks of those procuring the paddy can reach. The cultivators have to meet the canoeing charges and the cost of headloading. The paddy sacks are then shifted from the canoes by the headload workers into the trucks, which carry it to the rice mills. The cultivators are then supposed to get the price of the paddy procured either by the government or by the private rice mill owners. This brings one whole agricultural season to an end. The empirical data presented in the different stages of paddy cultivation exposes the collaboration required from the different sectors and factors for cultivating paddy in the risk-ridden landscape of Kuttanad.

The agricultural community’s confidence and skill to face the risks and do cultivation in the unique stretch of land below sea level, by overcoming all perils came from the wisdom and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. I realized that many among them now worried about the imbalance created in the environment due to the new ‘developments’. Meena, is a Latin Catholic agricultural labourer I met in Kavalam. I met her while she was catching fish with a small fishing rod from the water in front of her house to prepare that day’s lunch. While talking about the developments in the region and paddy cultivation she said, ‘Earlier we knew

⁵⁵ The problems connected with the availability of machines are discussed in detail in Chapter 6 and so I am not detailing it here.

the land and the landscapes so well that we knew what to do if a mishap happened. The new land reclamations and all the other developments are making everything unpredictable. The traditional knowledge derived from our ancestors are increasingly becoming of no use and hence catastrophes are becoming risks beyond control.' Aravindakshan's (1990) study supports Meena's statement. He wrote that with the new developments, the discipline observed in earlier times in respect of agricultural practices during seasons of rice cultivation has disappeared. In such a setting, my fieldwork helped me to comprehend the coordinated effort that was necessarily required for producing paddy in Kuttanad. My research into this united effort exposed the deep connection the inhabitants had to the region and its landscape in spite of all the conflicts and contests happening at the superficial level.

Connecting the Past and the Present

The connection between the inhabitants and the region often became apparent in their statements and in their endeavours to enliven the traditional culture of the region. The inhabitants often had functions and gatherings around Kuttanad to rejuvenate the folk songs and other traditional art forms of Kuttanad. Everyone I met, both the agricultural community and the non-agricultural community were proud of *Vallamkali*, the famous traditional boat regatta, staged in the backwaters of Kuttanad. *Vallamkali* brought all the people irrespective of social divisions from all the villages in Kuttanad together. So was Onam, the harvest festival of Keralam, Vishu, the new year of Keralam and *Kerala piravi*, the day the State of Keralam was formed, to name just a few local festivals and celebrations that were celebrated with great pomp in the region. I realized that the local myths, songs, music, dance, art, religious rituals, memories, etc. that are linked to the landscapes of the region are deeply interwoven into the fabric of social life that the past was becoming part of their present, subordinating time to space. My informants' narratives, myths and stories related with the region transformed the geographical landscape into something resembling a theatre - a natural stage upon the land where significant stories from the past unfolded demonstrating what Rodman (1992) wrote that narratives of places are not just told with words; they can be told and heard with senses other than speech and hearing. All these made me realize that in spite of conflicts and contestation, a large section of the inhabitants still maintained a deep connection to the landscapes of the region. However, with new land reclamations filling up the paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands, they were increasingly becoming aliens in their own land, as their familiar landscape was getting transformed each day by and for some forces that were unknown to them. Joniak-Luthi (2015) wrote, 'As places are ascribed new layers of spatial meaning, which alter spatial practices related to them, so also do the constitutive imageries change when new actors who do their own imagining appear.' With changing landscapes, the main and only link that still

connected the inhabitants to their past seemed to be paddy cultivation. But cultivating paddy in a contested terrain was not that easy either. This Chapter exposes the way places represent people and people embody places as exemplified by Rodman (1992), Feld and Basso (1996) and Joniak-Luthi (2015). It exposes the part played by places in the formulation of the identity of its inhabitants.

Conclusion

Steeped in history, Chapter 5 reveals the conditions that brought disparity in the relation between the inhabitants, which in turn brought changes in the relation between the inhabitants and the region that paved the way for the new circumstances that are leading to the transformation of the physical landscapes of Kuttanad. Together, it sheds light on the cultivation of paddy that still holds the inhabitants together, demanding cooperation in an atmosphere of conflict and contest. This chapter thus acts also as a bridge between Part I and II by providing a (historical) background to the ethnography that follows. The understanding of the discord that cropped up over the years provides the setting for the next chapter 6, which deals with the problems the agricultural community face to produce paddy as a result of the conflicts between the various elements that form the society in Kuttanad.

Part II

Chapter 6

Paddy Cultivation and the Agricultural Community

The change in the tone of relationship between the members of the agricultural community existed parallel to their feelings of attachment to the region as shown in Chapter 5. The fissure in the liaison between the inhabitants and the expansion of this gap between them following the various social, economic and political dynamics in Keralam, India and the rest of the world in the last few decades of the 20th and 21st centuries resulted in many losing interest in paddy cultivation or to give it up completely. This is a reason why new land reclamations are increasing in the region, as divergent new interests over the land and the resources are cropping up as shown in Chapter 4. One of the most significant problems of the emergence of new interests is that it is adversely affecting the cooperation needed for doing paddy cultivation.

It has been shown in the previous chapter that the success of a crop depends on the cooperation extended not only by those directly and indirectly related with agriculture but also by the non-agricultural community living in and outside Kuttanad. It also requires the timely collaboration and support of institutions like the government, which includes politicians, and its various administrative divisions and bureaucrats. Together with all these, the timely availability and service of technologies like machines and other infrastructures are also essential. However, at the time of my fieldwork, there was delay and lack of collaboration between the various people who were supposed to work together, making it extremely difficult to perform the various operations of cultivation on time and in the proper way. This was leading to increase in risks and loss in paddy cultivation. Moreover, the social, economic and cultural changes happening around were also influencing the agricultural community. Hence, the challenges (natural and human) facing the paddy producers I met were numerous. Chapter 6 delves into these challenges. I stumbled upon a number of issues like the cost of production and the cost of produce, debts, labour shortage, education, unemployment, migration and mechanization that affected the agricultural community. They were all adversely affecting paddy cultivation and transforming the region. Now I shall present each of these dynamics in the region.

The Cost of Production, the Cost of Produce and Debt

Fieldwork among the paddy cultivators brought my attention to two of the most important elements of production, that is, the cost of production and the cost of the produce. Several times, I came across paddy cultivators worrying about their cost of production being higher than the cost of their produce. This caught my attention and I investigated into it. I learned that in order

to produce paddy, the cultivators have to pay for land preparation, dewatering, levelling of fields, ploughing, seeds, sowing, lime to reduce acidity of soil, preplant herbicides, weedicides, fertilizers, hand weeding, transplanting, plant protection pesticides, harvesting and loading. The cost of production includes the wages paid for all the labour activities mentioned and the cost of materials needed. The government calculates the cost of production of paddy based on this in order to quote the price of the paddy i.e. the MSP. But during my fieldwork, I realized that often the ground realities are different and hence, the cost of production of paddy cultivators remained higher than the cost of produce or equal to it or slightly lower, giving them only a marginal profit most of the time (See Tables 5 and 6).

Now what are these ground realities? During my fieldwork, I learned that there is no fixed cost of production in Kuttanad and it varied from person to person, season to season, and area to area as it depended on various factors (See Tables 5, 6 and 7). Even the cost of each factor of production varies from year to year for different cultivators, areas and seasons. Sometimes an unexpected rain, floods, ingress of saline water or pests can bring loss and additional work increasing the cost of production. Risk factor is very high for paddy cultivation in Kuttanad. Similarly, the price of fertilizers, weedicides, preplant herbicides and seeds are increased without a parallel increase in the price of produce. Moreover, there are sundry expenditures like the cost of purchase of cultivation implements, repair of apparatuses and machines, expenses to provide refreshments and other incentives to labourers, etc. In the same way, the cultivators have to pay interest for the loans they have taken from private banks and moneylenders. Though the interest charged by nationalized and cooperative banks is only 4%, as per the norms of the government, my informants often depended on private banks and moneylenders for timely funds and for this, they had to pay 18-24% or sometimes even more as interest.⁵⁶ These expenses and instances are often overlooked and not always taken into consideration by the government when calculating the average cost of production in order to determine the cost of the produce.

The additional undercover expenses due to corruption also remains unrecorded. For example, the additional money the paddy cultivators have to pay to agents in order to get priority in obtaining the machines brought from outside Keralam, which is also mentioned later in this chapter on the section dealing with mechanization is nowhere included in government records as the cost of production. Another such example is related with wages. There are minimum wages for labourers in Keralam announced by the government. The wage rates approved by the

⁵⁶ Loans given by co-operative and nationalized banks are fixed amounts without any relation to the variations in the cost of production.

government for the different activities in paddy cultivation in Keralam from 2006 to 2015 are shown on Table 8. According to landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators I met in Champakulam, Ramankari, Thakazhi, Mampuzhakari, Chembumpuram and Puthukari, even if there are minimum wages, they had to pay higher amounts than the minimum wages for the labourers to come to work in their fields. Otherwise, the labourers will simply not come for work. As timely labour is important in paddy cultivation and due to labour shortage, they end up paying additional wages to get labourers. Thus, according to them, if the minimum wage is Rs 536 (in 2015) for a person who helps in the making of bunds, they had to pay Rs 600 to 650 to the labourers. The extra amount paid varied from field to field. From Table 8 it can be seen that the wages for the different activities have been increasing over the years. Hence, the extra amount paid has also been increasing. As this is done without any documents, the government does not calculate it while fixing the price of paddy. Due to lack of records, I also have to rely on the accounts of my informants. However, as this same testimony was told to me by landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators from different villages including my relatives who are engaged in paddy cultivation, I take their statements to be true.

I also understood that the cost of production is more and the profit less especially for cultivators who lease in fields from others. This is because they have to pay a rent to the landowners in addition to the general cost of production. There is no fixed amount for lease and the rent varies from field to field. As the lease amount is kept confidential, it was not possible for me to collect evidences regarding this apart from the statements of my informants. As most of the fields in Kuttanad are nowadays leased out to the cultivators, the majority of the paddy cultivators I met were facing this problem. The lease amount increased according to the whims of the landlords based on the productivity of the soil, the location of the fields, etc. The landlords who lease out their land are not affected by the cost of production and the price of paddy as they get whatever rent that is settled. The afflicted are the cultivators who lease in land. The lease amount is not included in the cost of production by the government, while fixing the price of paddy. Like this, there are innumerable undercover and unrecorded expenses, which the paddy cultivators have to bear in order to produce paddy, which increases their actual cost of production than what is documented in the government records. Hence, it is not possible to expect a uniform cost of production for all the cultivators. I enquired the cost of production of different landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators and cultivator-labourers in Champakulam, Mampuzhakari, Ramankari, Puthukari, Nedumudi, Chennankari and Kavalam and there were differences in the cost incurred by them during the same agricultural season. This confirmed that the cost of production varied from person to person and place to place. Based on my fieldwork, Table 6 shows the different costs of production per hectare incurred by three different paddy cultivators

in three different villages during the same agricultural season in the year 2017-18. After understanding the cost of production, I started my investigation into the cost of produce, that is, the cost of rice.

Cost of Rice

Paddy being the only source of livelihood for the majority of the inhabitants, the price of rice is extremely important. It is also a crucial decisive factor for the agricultural community whether to continue paddy cultivation or not. However, before I discuss the price of paddy, I have to write about yield. Between cost of production and price of paddy, what is important is the yield. The average yield in Kuttanad region is supposed to be around 6 tonnes of grains per hectare. However, I understood that due to various factors, paddy yield varies from cultivator to cultivator in Kuttanad. Bad quality seeds, the quality and amount of fertilizers used, the type of soil, ingress of salinity, pests, untimely rain, non-availability of machines and labour, etc. can adversely affect the yield for individual cultivators. Hence, if one cultivator in one paddy field obtains 5 tonnes of paddy per hectare, another cultivator in another paddy field in the same village or in another village might obtain less yield or more yield. Hence, the price of paddy and profit, if any, obtained by cultivators varies according to their yield.

Now I shall write about the price of paddy. I visited the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation in Ernakulam, the District Supply Office in Alappuzha and the Taluk Supply Office in Moncompu to collect information about the price of paddy. In addition to this, government records, articles, newspaper reports and accounts of informants have been helpful in my understanding of the paddy price situation in Kuttanad. I learned that in order to help the cultivators, the government started procuring paddy at a support price. The minimum support price (MSP) introduced by the central government in the 1960s is a type of market intervention by the government in which the government buys the agricultural product, with a minimum support price determined by the government. This was aimed as a safety net for cultivators against crashes in the market and to incentivize cultivators for more production. MSP is thus meant to become the baseline market price beyond which the prices are not allowed to fall. The State governments have the right to procure crops at a price higher than the MSP announced by the central government. However, the differences have to be borne by the State governments as subsidy.

The Government of Kerala has been offering MSP higher than that announced by the central government for paddy (See Table 9). The MSP at the time of my last fieldwork in 2017-18 was Rs. 2,330 per quintal. There are two problems I noticed connected with this when it comes to

paddy cultivation in Kuttanad. Firstly, as mentioned in the previous section, the actual cost of production is often very near to the paddy price obtained from the yield, at the MSP fixed by the government, and secondly, the prices at which cultivators are able to sell their crops are thus greatly influenced and limited by the MSP and are not based on demand and supply. In order to lower the cost of living in general and to keep the prices of food grains down, the government never quoted high prices for paddy and this adversely affected the paddy cultivators. The import of cheap rice from outside Keralam also affected the price of paddy produced within the State.

Moreover, I understood that even though the price of paddy obtained per kg is the price fixed by the government, the total price of paddy obtained from the yield per hectare, varies from person to person as shown on Table 6. After the sale of paddy and deducting the cost of production, only the cultivators who have done cultivation on their own land, can consider the balance amount as a profit. For the other cultivators who have taken the land on lease, only after deducting the lease rent paid to the lessor from the price of paddy can they find profit. Hence, the profit for them would be less. Analysing Table 9 that shows the price of paddy (MSP) in Keralam from 2004 to 2019, Table 5 that shows the cost of production and yield of paddy of one cultivator during three consecutive years in the same plot in Kuttanad and Table 6 that shows the cost of production of three cultivators in three different villages in Kuttanad one can clearly understand that the cost of production is high and the price obtained from the yield at the MSP fixed by the government is not sufficient enough to be considered as a good profit at all. The income generated from paddy cultivation mostly can be seen only as marginal or just reasonable profit. Though there are incidences of good profits rarely, chances of great losses are more frequent. When everything goes well in cultivation with regard to the availability of labour, materials and the weather, then the cultivators are more likely to make profit. However, profit in paddy cultivation in Kuttanad varies a lot due to various factors like I have already mentioned.

I discussed about the price of paddy to several inhabitants in the region during the different days of my fieldwork. I met one hundred and twelve landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators and cultivator-labourers in Champakulam, Karumadi, Mampuzhakari, Thakazhi, Karumadi and Mithrakari from all the castes and communities in the region who unanimously said that paddy cultivation cannot become profitable until the government fixes a higher price for paddy. They were of the opinion that the government must also provide the means needed for production at subsidized rates or reduced prices so that the cost of production will not be higher than the yield price obtained from the produce. Fifty-six among them also had the opinion that the agricultural

community should be given the right to fix the price of rice. However, conditions continued in the same way even when I finished my fieldwork in 2018.

Marketing of Paddy

Another related dilemma is the lack of proper marketing facilities for paddy. In addition to quoting prices that were unsatisfactory for the cultivators, the government also often failed to procure paddy in time, which forced my cultivator informants to sell it at cheap prices to private rice mill owners. The study of Varghese (1995) and the report in *The Hindu* (September 2016) supports this fact. Varghese (1995: 10) wrote that most of the cultivators in Kuttanad were forced to sell the produce soon after harvest at whatever price they got and hence were not able to make any profit. According to him, the traders were the main benefactors as they got the paddy at low prices. In such situations, some of the mills deliberately delayed procurement to force cultivators to sell paddy to them at even lower prices. The irony here is that the support price and procurement schemes were introduced by the government to save cultivators from the exploitation of intermediaries and private rice mill owners.

This negligence of the government was visible at the time of my fieldwork in procuring paddy at the right time. There were occasions when the paddy that was to be procured, was left in the fields itself without any measures being taken to carry it from the fields to the storage places. The harvested paddy remained deteriorating in the sun and the rain when rice shortage was becoming acute in the State. Ravivarma (2010) has also written about this condition. In addition to this, what was even more difficult for the cultivators was that it took a long time, even months, for the government to transfer the money of the procured paddy to the accounts of the cultivators who needed that money to pay back debts and also to start the operations for the next cultivation before the advent of the monsoons, floods and salinity. There was a report about this situation in *The Hindu* (September 2016). All these created an unpleasant relation between the agricultural community and the government. Moreover, it contributed in reducing the profit of paddy cultivators and pushing them into debts. This brings attention to the next related topic, that is, debts.

Debts

Cost of production, price of paddy, expenditure of the household and debts are closely connected in Kuttanad among paddy cultivators. As I have shown, in Kuttanad, the actual cost of production is often higher than the price of paddy yield obtained or equal to it and only occasionally lower than the price of paddy obtained. My understanding about debts among the agricultural community is based mainly on my interviews with inhabitants, personal participant

observations and newspaper reports. As my maternal family and family friends are engaged in agriculture in Kuttanad, I personally know many cases. Income was much better for those who had family members engaged in non-agricultural activities, especially those who had migrants working abroad. Those who depended entirely on paddy cultivation did not always have enormous bank accounts. In the case of the latter, even if a paddy cultivator manages to make profit for one agricultural season, he would have been already in debt due to loss in the previous cultivation that the profit he gets would be spend to pay back the debts and for the expenditures related with the next cultivation. If he does not have debts in the previous cultivations, which is a very rare case in my study area, for the next cultivation, things may not be as smooth as the previous ones, making him again fall into debts. So he is never out of the cycle of debts. What pushed them more into debts was the increasing household expenditures. In addition to education, food, clothing, health, dowry, etc. they are increasingly being part of the consumer culture that is developing in Kuttanad and Keralam and also part of the competitions to rise up in the social hierarchy. They need household appliances, vehicles, bigger house, gold, property, etc. to place themselves high in the social hierarchy. Hence, their needs are increasing. As the income and expenditures of households were very different, it was difficult to estimate the debts of different inhabitants.

The major saving and investment of those who were engaged only in the cultivation of paddy were cultivation itself. Most of them tried to save some money as cash, jewellery or land but in times of agricultural emergency, almost all of them had to use all their savings (if any) for cultivation purpose itself. As they did not have the adequate capital all the time for cultivating paddy, they often have to borrow money. Most of them either pawned their jewellery or borrowed money from banks, co-operative societies or moneylenders. Banks and co-operative societies provided loans on the surety of land. Hence, only real owners of land could get such loans. The study of Nair and Dhanuraj (2016: 10-11) regarding co-operative institution is important in this context.

According to Nair and Dhanuraj (2016: 10-11) co-operative institutions emerged as the main agricultural credit providing agency in the second half of the 19th century all over India patronized by both the Central and State Governments. According to the Kerala State Co-operative Societies Act (1969), co-operative institutions are formed to provide cheap agricultural credit to farmers in Keralam, to save them from moneylenders. At present, there is a three-tier co-operative credit structure comprising of the Kerala State Co-operative Bank, which is the apex bank with 20 branches, 14 District Co-operative Banks with 668 branches and 1,642 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) with 3,000 branches at the grassroots

level. Of the 1,642 PACS, 558 are running on loss, 30 are dormant and 34 societies are under threat of liquidation, as per 2015 statistics.

According to the report submitted by the International Co-operative Alliance Commission in 1966 and the National Policy on Co-operatives in India, 2002, one of the fundamental principles of co-operation upon which the co-operative societies are formed included autonomy and independence. At the same time, PACS in Keralam are reported to be affected by bureaucracy and excessive government reliance, which violate the above-mentioned principle. In the case of the Kerala co-operatives, government contributions in the share capital of PACS are very high at 13.7% in 2012, as compared to the national average of 9.2%. The high government contributions to the PACS share capital get reflected in the high government control of PACS in terms of board membership and operational level participation. Along with these, high non-performing assets, capital inadequacy and opposition to automation in PACS result in their poor service of credit delivery to cultivators. There has been a significant decline in the share of agricultural credit in the total credit of PACS, from 53% in 1981–82 to 17.45% in 2010–11, while at the national level, the share was 50.9% in 2010–11. This shows that PACS in Keralam are not financing agriculture compared to other States. All this resulted in placing many among the agricultural community ultimately into the trap of moneylenders.

Agricultural indebtedness is a reality in Kuttanad. It forced some paddy cultivators to fragment their land and sell it, mortgage it voluntarily or lose it under compulsion by court or revenue auction. There are also incidences of farmers committing suicide in Kuttanad due to loss and indebtedness as shown by James (2008) and The Hindu (April 2008). These incidents are proof of the indebtedness of the agricultural community and supports what I observed in Kuttanad. However, in spite of having debts, the agricultural community continued their traditional occupation and were not ready to give up. The trials of paddy cultivators do not end here. Labour shortage, education, unemployment, migration and mechanization of agriculture about which I am writing next, not only affected the cultivation of paddy but also posed serious challenges before the agricultural community, influencing them and transforming the region.

Labour Shortage

In spite of all changes and developments in the methods and techniques of cultivation and reduction in the area under paddy, as most of the agricultural operations are not yet fully mechanized, I noticed that paddy cultivation is still a labour intensive occupation requiring the hands of numerous agricultural labourers. In the fields where labourers are hired, during one agricultural season, in one hectare of land, twenty women labourers and thirty-four men

labourers are required to do the various cultivation operations. The rich landlords and landlord-cultivators hired labourers throughout the year to work in their fields. The cultivators who leased in fields also hired labourers throughout the years. The relatively small cultivator-labourers, cultivating less than 1.01 hectares (2.5 acres) of land also hired some labourers. Even the cultivator-labourers who hired themselves out for part of the year had to hire labourers in their own fields at the time of harvest. The hired labourers are mainly *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians.

I learned that the number of hired labourers available or turning up are not enough. During my fieldwork, this was obvious in the daily cultivation work. In Ramankari, for example, in one of the paddy fields I visited, which was leased in by an Ezhava cultivator from a Syrian Christian landlord, the number of agricultural labourer women needed for a day's work was twenty but the women who turned up for work was only fifteen. Similarly, the number of men labourers needed was six but only two came for work. This absence of labourers was observed in almost all the fields I visited throughout my research period. When labourers do not turn up, the work will be allotted to those who are present for work but the number of days of work increases. These delays sometimes adversely affect paddy cultivation, as time of operation is crucial. In spite of increase in wages, acute labour shortage is experienced, especially during peak agricultural seasons when there is increased demand for labour. Varghese (1995:7-8), Sasikumar and Raju (2000), Padmanabhan et.al (2001:5), Mahesh (2002) and Swaminathan (2007:107) have mentioned about the problem of labour shortage in the paddy fields of Kuttanad.

When approximately 80% of the total population in Kuttanad comprises the agricultural community, I wondered why and how there was shortage of labour. I came across a number of reasons for labour shortage in the paddy fields of Kuttanad. As some of these reasons are discussed under the following titles – education, unemployment and migration, I am reserving them for those sections. I am presenting here only the reasons that are not discussed there. The first reason is that following the implementation of land reforms in the 1960s, almost everyone in Kuttanad now possess land. Hence, most of the agricultural labourers work on their own land, especially during peak agricultural seasons, which temporarily keeps them away from the labour market. The second reason is that even if the pay is less, many of the labourers, especially the women labourers prefer work related with *Thozhilurappu* as the hardship is much less when compared to working in the paddy fields as they can work in the shade and take it easy. The wage of labourers for *Thozhilurappu* was Rupees 271 per day at the time of my fieldwork. The third reason is that with the construction of Thanneermukkom Bund and Thottappally Spillway,

unlike earlier, agricultural operations have become homogenized. Now all fields require labourers and machinery at the same time and so the prevailing labourers become insufficient and machinery unavailable. The third reason is social stigma. Social stigma combined with the negative value attached to paddy cultivation took away a large part of the labour force from the paddy fields. Sasikumar and Raju (2000: 35) also asserts the same.

The *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians never worked as hired labourers. There are many impoverished high caste/community families in Kuttanad that have migrated to other States to do other jobs that are considered as low grade such as factory workers, securities, cooks and waiters in restaurants, salesmen, marketing, etc. When left with no alternative other than agricultural labour, they preferred to migrate to a distant place where they were unknown rather than disgrace themselves in their own village. Studies of Tharamangalam (1981) and Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999: 69-70) also show similar tendencies. Among the hired labourers, I learned that many who managed to acquire money, which was mainly by way of migration abroad and remittances, or had income from means other than paddy cultivation, abstained from working in the fields. This applied to *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians.

However, a change that was observed at the time of my fieldwork was that even though social stigma remained in the background, more and more people from the different castes and communities were found coming forward, engaging in manual operations in their own fields to cut down the cost of production of paddy cultivation as mentioned in Chapter 5. This in a way eased the condition of social stigma. However, I felt that the social stigma and the consequent labour shortage reduced the confidence of the remaining paddy cultivators in their occupation, thereby adversely affecting their self-respect. However, in spite of labour shortage, paddy cultivation continues. Three issues closely related with labour shortage and the transformation of the region and its inhabitants are education, unemployment and migration. Now I turn to these issues.



Photo 16. A landlord-cultivator with his labourers in Champakulam.



Photo 17. Women agricultural labourers in the paddy fields in Champakulam.

Education

As I explored the transformation of Kuttanad, I realized that education has played a major role in the transformation of this agricultural tract. Education basically took away all the youngsters from the paddy fields. I could not see anyone below the age of thirty-five working in the paddy fields anywhere in Kuttanad. The majority of the labourers I met in the various fields, who were mainly *Pulayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and converted Christians, though literate, were not highly educated. This means they have not studied more than the tenth standard or plus two. The majority of the educated I met, that is, those who had a degree and/or higher qualifications showed aversion for manual work in the paddy fields.

Dilip (2010) showed that in Kerala all castes and communities, other than the Scheduled Tribes seriously took to education from the mid 1970s. In his study about school education in Kerala, he showed that until the mid 1990s, high school educational attainment was highest among the forward class Christians and forward class Hindus but from the mid-1990s, OBC Hindus and OBC Christians began to come forward and take the lead. This shows the efforts made by the low castes and communities to get educated in order to move out of the paddy fields. However, the employment exchange registration details shows that during the years 2015, 2016 and 2017 more OBC Hindus were registering their names for employment than the high castes and communities immediately after their tenth standard, plus two, graduation and post-graduation. Registering names at the Employment Office immediately after the tenth standard points to the fact that not many among them took up higher education like the high castes and communities.

Through participant observation and accounts of informants, I tried to trace the outlook of the inhabitants towards education and the transformation it was bringing in the region. I brought the topic of education while interviewing people. I talked with people working in the paddy

fields, those fishing in the rivers and canals, those engaged in occupations other than agriculture, and some of the inhabitants in their houses. I also visited a number of schools and colleges in the towns and villages of Kuttanad.

I realized that there is a section of inhabitants who would have liked to have their children engage in agriculture and another section who did not like them taking up agriculture. Among the former there were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians but no *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* and among the latter, there were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. However, taking the present condition of Kuttanad and its paddy cultivation into consideration, almost none of them, including the agricultural community, wanted their children to work in the paddy fields. Hence, all my informants gave importance to education knowing fully well that once their children's educational profile improved, they might not enter the paddy fields.

The social stigma attached to paddy cultivation is also an equally significant reason why they preferred educating their children so that they could take up occupations other than agriculture and free themselves from the old structures. Devayani, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Champakulam said, 'We suffered a lot in these paddy fields doing menial manual labour. Our children should not live like us.' I met her while she was transplanting in the fields owned by a Nayar landlord. Another day, I was walking along a canal that flowed in Kavalam. Shanthamma, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Kavalam was preparing fish by siting near the canal that flowed in front of her house. I talked with her and brought the topic of education and she said, 'Who respects us? Manual workers and non-manual workers have widely different pay structures and social status.' Her daughter was studying a teacher-training course in Changanassery. Hence, education was seen as a powerful weapon by those inhabitants striving to rise up the social ladder in Kuttanad to escape from the old structures.

When I interviewed more people, I realized that the social, economic and educational background of a household was a significant factor in determining the educational opportunities of children in the region. Students from Kuttanad region studied both in private schools and colleges owned by private persons, the Church and the NSS and public schools and colleges run by the government. The rich and well educated *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians were determined and able to send their children to private schools and colleges famous for its high standards. Most of the average rich and educated *Namboodirimar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians

sent their children to the educational institutions run by the Church or the NSS. The very poor and less educated among the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and also some *Namboodirimar* who were mostly unable to meet the rising expenditure of school and college education send their children to government schools and colleges, which were considered low in status. The children from the rich families who went to private schools and colleges known for high standards were often able to secure better openings and jobs than the others. Being a native of the region and having intermingled closely with people belonging to different layers of the society, I have noticed this personally. However, there are many exceptions and variations to this. Hence, if the exceptions are not taken into account, it could be said that the old structures repeated itself in the new social hierarchy. Therefore, even if they tried to escape from the paddy fields and the old structure, they still fell in the same positions in the new structures as well.

Albeit the majority wanted to get educated and desired to give maximum education to their children, I sensed an apprehension among the agricultural community mainly due to the growing number of unemployed inhabitants and due to the rising labour shortage in agricultural activities. Maybe it was due to this apprehension that fifteen of my informants from the agricultural community I met in Mithrakari, Ramankari and Champakulam who wished their children could join them in agriculture criticized the educational system in Kerala that it did not instill interest in agriculture among the children. My informants included *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians. I interviewed them separately but they had similar views. In their view, the educational system is moulding job aspirations to serve the interests of the *agola muthalalikal* (global capitalists), thereby fundamentally modifying people's values and behavioural patterns. Pappan, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer I met in the paddy fields in Moncompu, who was one among them commented, 'There are not many who get educated to become a paddy cultivator or to get a job in the agricultural sector.' His daughter is a nurse in North India and his son is doing coir business in Changanassery. Even though Pappan was happy that his son was doing well in his business, he wished that his son joined him in agriculture.

I found that there are 219 engineering colleges, 33 MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery) colleges, 129 colleges that provide MBA courses across the State of Kerala but only 9 agriculture colleges in the State. This exposes the lack of interest in agriculture and related occupations in the State. The students I met from the region had divergent occupational ambitions other than paddy cultivation. Among them, I met several youngsters desiring to work

in the IT services and the BPOs in the major cities of India.⁵⁷ All these shed light on the statements made by my informants who criticized the educational system. My informants further pointed out that those in the State administration are those who got this kind of ‘capitalist’ education and they formed a transnational cadre of planners who designed and executed various forms of environmental interventions that only suited the interests of the *agola muthalalikal*. The implementation of development plans without any regard for the environment and the inhabitants in Kuttanad gave such an impression.

Education and the subsequent labour shortage are bringing significant transformation in Kuttanad. But parallel to this, another change is also happening. As mentioned earlier, the new inclination of more people from different castes and communities to engage in manual labour related with paddy cultivation in their own fields, even if it is to reduce the cost of production, is a novel change, which might at some point in time lead to the disappearance of social stigmas connected with paddy cultivation. This is just an assumption, which may or may not happen. However, the fact that there are some inhabitants who wish their children could work with them in agriculture if the conditions were better in Kuttanad and their criticism of the educational system that does not promote interest in agriculture points at their wish to carry on their traditional occupation and exposes their deep affection for the region. Hence, I sensed both severance and attachment in the background of transformation. I now turn to another related topic, that is, unemployment.

Unemployment

Throughout my fieldwork period, I came across people from different castes and communities and age groups who remained unemployed in the different villages of Kuttanad. This understanding prompted me to trace the reasons why there was unemployment in the region and to follow the attitude, approach and thoughts of the inhabitants regarding it. Apart from secondary sources, my understanding about unemployment is based on participant observation and accounts of informants.

⁵⁷ Information Technology in India is an industry consisting of two major components: IT services and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). IT service management refers to the entirety of activities that are performed by an organization to design, plan, deliver, operate and control information technology services offered to customers. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is a subset of outsourcing that involves the contracting of the operations and responsibilities of a specific business process to a third-party service provider. BPO is typically categorized into back office outsourcing, which includes internal business functions such as human resources or finance and accounting, and front office outsourcing, which includes customer-related services such as contact centre (customer care) services. India is now the world’s favoured market for BPO companies, among other competitors, such as, Australia, China, Philippines and Ireland. The BPO boom in India is credited to cheap labour costs and India’s huge talent pool of skilled, English speaking professionals. Most companies in the US and UK outsource IT related business processes to Indian service providers. Ten of the top BPO centres in India at the time of my fieldwork were Genpact, Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, Aegis Limited, Serco Global Services, Infosys, WNS Global Services, First Source Solutions, Hinduja Global Solutions and EXL Service.

Cheriyian (2004) and Zachariah and Rajan (2005 and 2012) affirms that unemployment is a major problem in the State of Keralam. Zachariah and Rajan (2012:66) shows that in 2008, 778,000 people, that is, 380,000 males and 398,000 females were unemployed in Keralam. In 2011, 1.05 million of Kerala's population was unemployed, that is, 465,000 males and 580,000 females. Thus, the period 2008-2011 saw a large increase in unemployment in Keralam. Zachariah and Rajan (2007: 52) noted that in 2007, the highest unemployment rate in the State of Keralam was observed in Alappuzha District where the rate was 16.2% compared with the State average of 12.2%. Even in 2011, the unemployment rate in Alappuzha District was higher than the State average of 10.5%. In Alappuzha, it was 15.6% as shown by Zachariah and Rajan (2012). This affirms the prevalence of unemployment in the Kuttanad region, validating what I observed during my fieldwork period.

Zachariah (2001) provides information regarding unemployment in Keralam on the basis of caste/community especially with regard to *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians. According to him in Keralam, the unemployment rate among men is highest among *Nayanmar*, followed by Syrian Christians, *Ezhavanmar* and Latin Christians. According to him, the unemployment rate among Syrian Christian women is about 30%. He noted that it is significantly lower among Ezhava and Latin Christians women. However, he noted that 45% of the Syrian Christians are self-employed, pointing to the fact that no other caste/community in Keralam has such a high rate of self-employment. He also showed that *Nayanmar* have the highest proportion of males employed in government and the semi-government sectors. The Syrian Christians come second than other caste/communities. Among women, he noted that Syrian Christians are at par with *Nayanmar* with respect to employment in Government services. According to him, the overall index of occupational status in Keralam places *Nayanmar* on the top with 247 points compared with 229 points for the Syrian Christians, followed by *Ezhavanmar* and Latin Christians.

Further research made me understand that unemployment in Kuttanad and in Keralam is not due to lack of education but due to inadequate employment opportunities, which are capable of absorbing the educated having high educational qualifications. Zachariah et.al (2000 and 2001), Kannan and Hari (2002) and Zachariah and Rajan (2004 and 2007) show that educational level of the population and the unemployment rate is the highest in Keralam in India. Zachariah and Rajan (2005: 24-25) showed that in 1998, unemployment rate was the highest among degree holders. It was 31%. In 2003, unemployment rate was the highest among secondary level educated persons. It was almost 40%. In 2003, the rate of unemployment among the degree holders had not declined. It had increased to 36%. There was hardly any unemployment among

those with below primary level education either in 1998 or in 2003. According to them over the 5-year period 1998-2003, unemployment rate increased by 8% among the educated. An irony in the Kuttanad labour market, which I noticed, is the prevalence of labour shortage in the paddy fields side by side with unemployment. When Mathamma, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Mithrakari, was sharing his worries over labour shortage in the coming harvest season, Tony, a Syrian Christian boy who had passed engineering from an engineering college in Thiruvananthapuram was remaining unemployed in the same village.

The realization that it was mainly the inadequate employment opportunities that was generating unemployment in Kuttanad motivated me to communicate with the youngsters in the region between the age groups 18 and 30 in order to know their thoughts. I talked with the children of both my agricultural and non-agricultural community informants. Some of them were students. Some of them were working outside Kuttanad and some of them remained unemployed. I realized that many of the educated in Kuttanad were not getting the jobs for which they got education and training and therefore remained unemployed. Some of them waited until they got the preferred job, while others ended up doing some other jobs than for what they studied. Usually such jobs were poorly paid. Most of them preferred jobs abroad or in some national or international companies, IT services, BPOs, government jobs, or some professional jobs like engineering, medical, banking, teaching in schools and colleges, etc. that provided a regular salary. The less educated I met in Kuttanad also had strong job preferences, which was a reason why many among them were also remaining unemployed. But none of them wanted to do paddy cultivation due to social stigmas and aversion towards manual labour. Raveesh (2013) has also written about the reluctance of inhabitants to take up agricultural occupations. I felt that the educated unemployed in Kuttanad were remaining stranded in a web made by the inadequate condition in Kuttanad, the education they acquired, and the attractive world outside to which they aspired to be a part.

Together with those who were least interested in taking up agriculture, I also met some young informants who showed interest in agriculture and in the region. Simon was one of them. He is a Latin Catholic student from Kainakari whom I met in a college in Kottayam. He is a History student and told me that after getting a job, he would be leasing his paddy fields, as long as paddy is cultivated in Kuttanad, as an additional income. Ramesh, an Ezhava student from Kavalam who is studying in a college in Kottayam said that if or when the conservation law changes, his inherited property would be of great value and could be used for some 'productive' purposes other than paddy cultivation. Sarath, a Syrian Christian student from Champakulam studying in Changanassery said he was thinking of entering into the tourism business after

completing his education. However, I realized that even though a minority of the youngsters showed interest in agriculture and the region, the majority were not ready to engage in paddy cultivation.

After communicating with the youngsters in the region, I had conversations regarding unemployment with some politicians also. Two politicians from the Communist Party of India I met in Alappuzha told me that the government was making all efforts to provide employment to both the educated and uneducated people not just in Kuttanad but also in Keralam. Antony is a politician from the Indian National Congress who is from Chennankari. I met him during an Onam celebration in Chennamkari where he was making a speech. While talking to him personally after the celebrations he said that the agricultural community does not accept the fact that there are other inhabitants also living in Kuttanad who are not interested in agriculture. In order to provide them employment in sectors other than agriculture, the government will have to 'develop' Kuttanad. For the purpose of developing Kuttanad, paddy fields and waterbodies will have to be reclaimed to provide the needed infrastructural facilities to absorb them. Antony said, "The agricultural community never allows this. They will not allow anyone to 'develop' Kuttanad and at the same time, they want the government to give employment to their educated children. What can the government do then?" While this was what the politicians had to tell me, I turned to the agricultural community to know what they thought about unemployment in the region.

I once visited the house of Paulose, a Syrian Christian cultivator in Champakulam to interview him. He is a family friend and so I knew him from before. When I reached his house, I found that two of his friends were also there with him; Georgekutty, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Mampuzhakari and Sajan, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Kannadi. While talking about unemployment Paulose said, 'If developed properly, agriculture is more than capable of absorbing all the unemployed in the region'. Sajan agreed to this and said, 'Industrial development is not necessary for the solution of unemployment in Kuttanad. Paying attention to occupations that are related to the resources in the region like agriculture and related occupations are more than enough, and it will bring tremendous rural development.' Georgekutty was also of the same opinion, 'Kuttanad is basically an agricultural region and taking into consideration the special geography of the region, even if big efforts are made to industrialize the region, it will never be possible to reach the growth of the highly industrialized nations of the world. On the other hand, if agriculture in Kuttanad, for what it is known and famous for is modernized, and respect is given to agriculture and to those engaged in it, and the cultivators are given all the help and security they need, it is certainly possible to prove the

region's strength in agricultural commodities in the world market. If not, the region will be completely destroyed and it will neither prosper in agriculture nor become industrialized.'

On another day, I met George, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator at Chennankari. I met him in his paddy fields while he was supervising the work in his fields where he had twelve hired labourer women from the Ezhava and Pulaya castes. In his opinion, 'More schools, colleges, hospitals and even shopping centres and other infrastructural developments can be established in Kuttanad along with agriculture in order to generate employment. The only thing is that it should be done without adversely affecting agriculture and the environment of the region.' According to these informants, rational planning and development will be able to accommodate all the unemployed and educated people in jobs in the region itself. They pointed out that the banking sector is quite developed in the region and so it is absorbing a number of educated youngsters from the region.

Accommodating the highly educated and qualified unemployed inhabitants is a necessity. Kuttanad being predominantly an agricultural region, how much is it possible to develop it in order to accommodate everyone? We have already seen that land reclamations and the filling up of paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands are causing ecological imbalances and difficult living conditions in the region. Is development possible only by the transformation of the physical landscapes of Kuttanad? Is it necessary to provide employment to the unemployed, in the region itself? I realized that this is the basis of the conflict between the agricultural community and the non-agricultural community in Kuttanad. At the time of my fieldwork, Kuttanad remained as a contest site between those who wanted to transform the physical landscapes to generate new employment opportunities and those who resisted the transformations that were being brought without respecting the ecology of the region. Having comprehended the unemployment situation in Kuttanad, I now proceed to the next related topic 'Migration' that affected paddy cultivation and influenced the transformation of the region.

Migration

Inhabitants from Kuttanad have migrated to other districts of Keralam, to other States and to countries outside India (Zachariah et.al 2003 and Zachariah and Rajan 2015). Zachariah et.al (2003) stated that a very high proportion of migrants to States outside Keralam and abroad have their origin in the midland and coastal regions of the State where rice and coconut are the main agricultural crops, means of subsistence and the sources of cash income. This, they wrote, was because traditional agriculture offered very little scope for economic mobility. The rice and coconut producing coastal region that they write about includes the Kuttanad region. Table 10

shows that the number of emigrants and outmigrants from Keralam has been increasing from 1998-2011. Neighbouring towns like Changanassery, Kottayam and Alappuzha have many migrants from Kuttanad because of their proximity. Most of those who have migrated to other States from Kuttanad are in cities such as Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Delhi. From the study of Zachariah and Rajan (2012), it is understood that between the years 1998 and 2011, the number of people who migrated from Alappuzha District to other States in India increased from 89,523 to 101,331 as shown on Table 11. Similarly, between the years 2007 and 2011, there is an increase in the number of people who migrated from Kuttanad region to other States in India. It increased from 142,559 to 143,684 as shown on Table 12.

When it comes to countries outside India, my informants had emigrated to different parts of the world like the Gulf countries, USA, UK, New Zealand, Australia and western European countries like Germany and Italy. A similar observation is noted in Zachariah and Rajan's (2004) study about migration. They wrote that Kerala emigrants have spread their wings over a larger number of countries, including countries in Europe, America and South East Asia other than the Gulf countries during the period 1999-2004. From the study of Zachariah and Rajan (2012), it is found that between the years 1998 and 2011 the number of emigrants from Alappuzha District to places abroad increased from 62,870 to 144,386 as shown on Table 11. Similarly, between the years 2007 and 2011, there was an increase in the number of emigrants from Kuttanad to places abroad. It increased from 175,310 to 260,988 as shown on Table 12. However, I realized that even if the number of out-migrants and emigrants have increased, they form only a small minority of the population in Kuttanad.

My data about migrations is based on personal experience from being a native, participant observation, accounts of informants and secondary sources about migrations like Zachariah (2016), Zachariah and Rajan (2004, 2005, 2007, 2012 and 2015) and Zachariah et.al (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003). I knew many people who had migrated from Kuttanad. They included my relatives and friends. I myself is an emigrant from Kuttanad region, living in Norway. I first got in touch with those who had migrated to the different towns in Keralam and then through them, others who were their friends and their relatives. Other migrants I contacted were the friends and relatives of my informants from the agricultural community in Kuttanad. I talked with people in Kuttanad also about migrations. My informants included *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians. The out-migrants and emigrants included people from these castes and communities.

Though I came across several migrants from Kuttanad, I noticed that there are not many immigrants to Kuttanad, except by way of marriage or service transfers of some government employees. Usually when a region is given importance by the government for development purposes, or when a region is being developed, people flock to such regions for employment and to settle down, like how it happened when Kuttanad was developed into a major rice producing region in the 1800s. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the opposite was happening. People were moving out of the region in search of jobs and for settling down elsewhere. In that case, the question is what is ‘development’ in Kuttanad? What is meant by development when people no longer want to work or stay in a region largely because of the ‘developments’ itself?

Reasons for Migration

I started looking for the reasons why people are migrating from Kuttanad. My informants in the villages and towns offered various explanations for emigration from Kuttanad. All the reasons were either economic or social in nature but the socio-economic factors are intricately connected in Kuttanad. I realized that money is one of the most important factors behind migration. Money is essential to be part of the rising consumer culture in Keralam and most importantly, to position oneself in the new class hierarchy.⁵⁸ Hence, the inhabitants are looking for ways to acquire money and migration is one of the main means possible for them to attain it. Avarachan, a Syrian Christian businessman from Champakulam settled in the US whom I met on his holiday trip to his family in Kuttanad brought my attention to the pay difference in Keralam and abroad. When I checked the minimum monthly salary of a nurse working in a government hospital in Keralam, it was Rupees 20,000 in 2018. At the same time, the minimum monthly salary of a nurse working in a government hospital in USA was 4218 US Dollars, that is, Rupees 317,935; in UK was 2092 pound, that is, Rupees 194,699; UAE was AED 4,817, that is, Rupees 98,851. Hence, it is clear that there is a good difference in the pay scales. During my interviews with three of the nurses working in the Gulf and in the UK, whom I met in Kuttanad, I was told that even after all their expenditures, they have a good amount to save. One of them was an Ezhava and two of them were Latin Catholics. If we compare six months salary of a nurse working in USA and a cultivator doing paddy cultivation for six months, we can see that a nurse makes around Rupees 1,907,463 whereas a paddy cultivator may make a marginal/reasonable profit or a marginal/great loss. It varies and depends on various conditions but never attaining the steady income that a salaried nurse gets in the USA (See Table 6).

⁵⁸ I am writing about the new class hierarchy in detail in Chapter 8 and so I am reserving the discussion for later.

Conversations with some others made me understand that the income they get from Kuttanad is not enough for them to be part of the rising consumer culture and to position themselves high in the new class hierarchy. I met Dileep an Ezhava electrician from Kainakari working in the Gulf while he was on holiday in Karumadi. When I asked him the reason why he migrated, he said, 'It is difficult to depend entirely on the seasonal income from paddy cultivation. The income acquired from the various occupations available in the region are also not enough to make ends meet and to be part of the changing living styles. People prefer getting a job with a regular sound income to feel stable and secure. There are not even any insurance or pensions for the paddy cultivators. Their entire life is at risk. And what do they get at the end for taking all those risks?' In his view, circumstances are pushing people out of the region. I heard similar responses from several others who had emigrated from Kuttanad. However, unlike what Dileep said now there are insurance and pension schemes for cultivators and workers. But from what I learned during fieldwork, insurances are given only for severe calamities like for example, the 2018 floods. Pests and annual floods being a regular phenomenon in Kuttanad, they are not considered as severe calamities and hence the cultivators are often excluded from insurances. There was a report in *The Hindu* (June 2015) about this. And if at all insurances are given, the amount would be very meagre. Also, as in the case of paddy procurement, there is great delay in getting the insurance amount from the government.

The case of pension is also not different. It has to be mentioned that pensions for farmers are a very recent arrangement in Keralam, brought for the first time only in 2009 as reported by *The Hindu* (August 2009). Before that, no farmer got any pensions. According to the 2009 pension scheme, the amount given to farmers above the age of 60 is very meagre, that is, only Rs. 300 per month. This pension amount at the time of my fieldwork was Rupees 1000 per month. Compared to the daily expenses in Keralam today, this amount is very insufficient. I also learned that the pension is not distributed regularly every month. It is distributed only when there is 'enough' money in the government treasury. Sometimes people have to wait for 3-4 months, without pension, but they will get the total amount for the lapsed months consolidated. A new bill was introduced in the Kerala Assembly in 2019 after my fieldwork ended, for a new pension for farmers in Keralam but according to this bill, only farmers who possess up to a maximum of 15 acres of land are eligible for the pension. All this made the ground reality very different from how it looks in government documents making it akin to what Dileep stated. As household expenditures and desires of people varied from person to person and from household to household, it was difficult for me to assess the amount of money one needed to be part of the new lifestyles emerging in Kuttanad. However, from the accounts of informants, I understood that the amount of money got from paddy cultivation and other occupations in the region was

not enough for many of them, especially those who desired to rise up in the social hierarchy, and so whoever got a chance to migrate, usually utilized the opportunity.

For most of those who desired to migrate from Kuttanad, their first preference was always external migration. The second preference often alternated between other districts/towns within Keralam and other States/cities outside Keralam depending on jobs and personal likes. The choice largely depended on the pay scale. The majority of my informants who migrated abroad and were satisfied with their working and living conditions there did not have any intentions of returning permanently to Kuttanad. However, there were a few who said that they were living and working abroad only because of the abysmal living and working conditions back home. I met nine migrants in Puthukari, Moncompu, Chennankari and Mamapuzhakari who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanamar*, and Syrian Christians. They were working in the Gulf mainly in the construction industry and had come back after they were able to pay back their debts at home or after they made enough money to give dowries to their daughters, sisters, or relatives. In their cases, they did not want to work more abroad. It could be the tough working conditions there that made them come back to Kuttanad after making use of the higher pay scales abroad for their immediate needs. Rajan (2019) provides a good account of the abysmal working conditions of migrant workers in the Gulf countries, supporting the assumption.

Almost all the other reasons I came across for migration from Kuttanad are also basically connected with people's desire to make money and to rise up in the social hierarchy. The social stigma attached to paddy cultivation is the second reason behind migration. As I have already written about social stigma in the previous sections on labour shortage, education and unemployment, I am not repeating it here. Lack of employment opportunities for the educated inhabitants according to their educational qualifications as mentioned in the section about unemployment is the third cause. Deteriorating living conditions, which is an impact of development failures mentioned especially in Chapter 4 is the fourth factor that encouraged migration. Other reasons included the glamour attached to working abroad. Two young migrants from the Ezhava caste I met in Thakazhi and four others I met in Nedumudi and Kumarakom from the Nayar caste and Latin Catholic community opted overseas jobs in order to get good marriage alliances back home. Men and women with jobs abroad are in high demand in the matrimonial market. Sixty years back, when all the inhabitants were engaged in paddy cultivation, they preferred marrying from within the region. In that way, both the man and the woman who knew the life in the locality could cooperate in the cultivation of paddy. At the time of my fieldwork, my informants, especially the women preferred marrying men outside

the region. Hence, there were diverse explanations for migrations but the fundamental reason remained the same.

Impact of Migration

How did migration affect paddy cultivation and transform the region? I came across two main impacts during my fieldwork. The very first impact is labour shortage. Besides creating shortage of labour in paddy cultivation, migration severely depleted a large number of critical occupations in the region. Migrants from Kuttanad to the neighbouring towns and abroad included engineers, technicians, people in the field of medicine like doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, etc., production executives, managers and supervisors, accountants and auditors, teachers of all categories and some who were in the service sector like hotel workers, housekeepers, cooks and waiters. There were also skilled workers like electricians, plumbers, welders, carpenters, masons, painters, drivers, mechanics and tailors. Others were engaged in sectors like trade, transport, communication, finance, real-estate business, personal services and government services. Zachariah and Rajan (2012) and Raveesh (2013) have shown this tendency that is observed in Keralam in general. Zachariah and Rajan (2012: 7) stated that even though the economic benefits received by the State from annual remittances were huge, they had to be balanced with the loss in human resources. They showed that there is acute scarcity of qualified workers in every field in the State. According to them, more than 30% of persons with higher educational qualifications are living abroad. More than 25-30% of workers in high skill occupations are living outside the State. Likewise, Raveesh (2013:16) wrote that India with an estimated number of 11.4 million emigrants was the second emigration country in the world, behind Mexico (11.9 million). He noted that every year, thousands of highly qualified doctors, engineers, scientists and other intellectuals left India and migrated to foreign countries.

I came across households relying on the remittances sent by family members working abroad in almost all the villages and towns I visited. Along with migration, remittances also played a great role in the depletion of labour in the labour market in Kuttanad. Living on the remittances, the migrant households either remained unemployed or took up other occupations than paddy cultivation and worked/did business mostly outside Kuttanad in the neighbouring towns. Similarly, I also came across returned emigrants who were engaged in paddy cultivation before their migrations, not joining cultivation after returning from abroad. Seven of them hailing from Kavalam, Pulinkunnu, Kumarakom and Moncumpu who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Latin Catholics told me that they have enough income from means other than paddy cultivation and so they did not feel that there was a need for them to work hard in the fields anymore. They also considered it below their dignity to work in the paddy fields, as remittances

had increased their economic and social position in the society. Thirteen returned emigrants from Nedumudi, Champakulam, Kumarakom and Chembumpuram who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians leased their land to other cultivators while two in Kumarakom, a Nayar and a Syrian Christian left their fields uncultivated and barren. However, this does not mean that all the families of migrants gave up paddy cultivation. There were many who continued paddy cultivation.

In Kuttanad, there was a view among my informants that if the people who migrated had remained in the region, they would have remained unemployed, taking into account the few job opportunities available and their unwillingness to work in the paddy fields. Zachariah and Rajan (2012: 56) stated that in 2011, before migration, unemployment rate was as high as 33% of the labour force among the emigrants, and 62% among the outmigrants. Compared with these rates, unemployment in the general population of Kerala was only 10.5% of the labour force. Therefore, it is true that migration brought about significant reduction in the unemployment rate in the State. Devasi was a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator I met in Pulinkunnu. We were walking together the long stretch of paddy fields to reach his house after the day's work. While talking about developments and migrations he said in a sad tone, 'Even though unemployment is reduced, it is not by providing employment to the unemployed within the region, but by getting them out of the region.' In his opinion, that cannot be called 'development' of a region. Hearing this statement, some questions came up in my mind. Is not there a limit to the developments that can be brought in a small agricultural region like Kuttanad? Is not it practically impossible to bring non-agricultural developments to give employment to all its diversely educated and skilled inhabitants in the background of limited area and stiff resistance from the agricultural community? When I raised such a concern to some of the members of the agricultural community in Nedumudi and Karumadi, they pointed out that they fully support infrastructural and other developments that are brought without adversely affecting agriculture and the region. Maybe their statement can be food for thought for the development planners.

Thus, it is found that migrations are transforming the occupational structure in Kuttanad by taking away people from the paddy fields and the region. It influenced people's attachments to the region and it increased land reclamation activities thereby altering the physical landscapes. It significantly influenced the social structure as well. This leads us to the second major impact of migration, that is, the changes it brings in the society of Kuttanad.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ As in this chapter, I have focused mainly on the impact of migrations on paddy cultivation and as changes in the social composition forms the content of Chapters 7 and 8, I am saving this discussion for later.

Furthermore, I grasped that the economic and social accomplishments of those who migrated generated a desire for international connections among the youngsters in the region, which in turn inspired them also to migrate. The study by Raveesh (2013) also indicates this desire among the youngsters in Keralam. Now I move to mehanization, the next and last predicament I intend to mention here, faced by the paddy cultivators.

Mechanization

One of the main solutions to the problem of increasing labour shortage in paddy cultivation in my study area is mechanization of agriculture. Mechanization was first brought by the government in the latter half of the 20th century when labour was surplus in Kuttanad. Hence, the trade unions and the agricultural community opposed it, fearing that it would displace labour and produce unemployment. Sasikumar and Raju (2000), Cheriyan (2004: 12-13), Kakkakunna (2014) and Nair and Dhanuraj (2016: 7-8) have written about this predicament. Conversely, with the increase in labour shortage, the attitude against mechanization softened. Still, it was only in 2000 that machine harvesting began in Kuttanad without much opposition from the trade unions. Moreover, this was permitted only in the fields where there was labour shortage. However, I found that even though the use of machines were increasing, many of the input applications still needed manual labour, especially because of the unique methods of cultivating paddy in Kuttanad. Hence, there is now a clear division of labour between labourers and machines in the field.

Preference for Machines

For various reasons, the majority of my agricultural community informants, especially the landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators preferred using machines. Understanding the problem of labour shortage, even some of the cultivator-labourers and labourers I met in Kavalam, Kainakari, Chembumpuram and Karumadi also supported the use of machines, so that paddy cultivation continues in Kuttanad. The reasons for preference of machines were diverse. First of all, labour shortage was acute when it was most needed, and this affected crops. In this situation, in order to cultivate paddy, they needed machines. Secondly, labourers' wage increase had increased the cost of cultivation. In order to lower the cost of cultivation, they preferred using machines. Thirdly, to avoid confrontations with the trade/labour unions and labourers over various labour issues, they opted for machines. Moreover, machines made agricultural operations easier, faster and more timely than manual labour ever could. Mechanization and the introduction of new technologies developed new employment opportunities too. Tractor drivers, mechanics, those working and looking after power driven pumps and power tillers, agricultural experts advising on seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and farm

practices, etc., are attracting more skilled and educated people towards agriculture. All these factors were encouraging the use of machines at the time of my fieldwork. It seemed like the machines were bringing new structures in the region. A question I pondered during my fieldwork was did the increase in the use of machines eradicate social stigmas connected with manual labour and paddy cultivation? At the time of my fieldwork, as manual labour was carried on alongside the use of machines, social stigma remained. But the question whether the use of more machines in future would eradicate social stigmas remains unanswered waiting for time to reveal.

Problems connected with Mechanization

In spite of all the pomp about mechanization as a 'development' and many preferring to use machines, I realized that it was not at all easy to get them in the fields mainly due to its unavailability. The Hindu (October 2016) has reported the unavailability of machines in Kuttanad. Apart from the government of Keralam, a few landlords, landlord-cultivators and private persons engaged in renting-business own machines. My cultivator informants always preferred private machines to government machines. The government only has a limited number of machines and those in working condition are even fewer. The New Indian Express (September 2017) has reported about harvest machines rusting in government offices due to lack of repair and maintenance. Even though the politicians I met from the different political parties in the region told me about the different ways the government was supporting the agricultural community, these instances pointed at the indolent attitude of the government. When it comes to private machines, those owned by landlords and landlord-cultivators become available only after their private use and there are not many people engaged in the renting of machines. Hence, as cultivation starts in all the paddy fields, it is not possible for everyone to get the few machines that are available at the right time.

As enough machines for paddy cultivation are not available in Keralam, most of the machines have to come from the neighbouring States at the time of each cultivation. Dependence on the neighbouring States for the use of machines is problematic as timing is exceedingly important for cultivation in Kuttanad. The neighbouring States release their machines only after their own agricultural operations are over and this sometimes does not correspond with the agricultural operations in the region. At the time of my fieldwork, the cultivators also had to pay exorbitant charges to the neighbouring States to get these machines. The charge was Rupees 1900 (24.02 Euro) per hour. The Hindu (February 2016) reported that the amount varied according to the whims and fancies of the machine operators. As the charges were fixed per hour, the machine operators from the neighbouring States deliberately brought machines that were not in good

condition so that they could work very slowly in order to increase the hours of work. The Hindu (February 2016) has reported about the deplorable condition of the machines coming from other States. The government has not done anything yet to make sure that the machines that come to Kuttanad from the neighbouring States are in good condition.

Inefficiency and corruption made matters worse. In addition to machine charges, there were agent's fees and I was told by informants from different parts of Kuttanad who did not want their names to be disclosed that local politicians took their cut for allowing priority in usage. None of these extra and undercover expenses is included in the cost of production by the government while fixing the price of paddy. My informants' presumption was that there was an understanding between the machine agents and the politicians in the government and that was the reason why the government kept its machines out of order so that the cultivators will be forced to use machines coming from outside. Delay in agricultural operations, especially due to non-availability of machines, is a frequent reason for crop failures, bringing heavy loss to cultivators. I have seen my relatives who are engaged in paddy cultivation experiencing similar difficulties. Hence, I realized that the agricultural community faced ample problems connected with mechanization too.

In spite of the dire need for machines due to labour shortage, I found that not many owned machines of their own. The majority used the few machines that were available. I was even told by my landlord-cultivator and cultivator informants in Kavalam that apart from the initial investment, there is not much cost involved in using machines. The cost of a combine-harvester ranges from Rupees 10 lakhs to Rupees 23 lakhs depending on the horsepower. Then why were not more people investing in machines? Josekutty, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator who is a family friend in Champakulam, provided an answer. He said, 'We started using machines very recently. Almost all the cultivators in Kuttanad are in financial difficulty and the future of paddy cultivation is uncertain. So no one feels safe in investing now.' The lackadaisical attitude of the government and the hesitant attitude of the agricultural community in investing in machinery, I realized, pointed at a silent understanding and comprehension of the transformation that is happening in the region – an expectance of the disappearance of paddy cultivation somewhere in the near future.

Paddy Cultivation in a Contested Geography

Unlike a hundred years ago, paddy cultivation no longer unites the rulers and the ruled in the paddy fields. The emergence of new interests is adversely affecting the cooperation needed for doing paddy cultivation. All these are increasing the challenges (natural and human) of the

paddy producers, adversely affecting paddy cultivation and transforming the region. The challenges faced by the agricultural community to produce paddy is an impact of the change in the relation between people and places and can be related to what Tuan (1975), Hegel (1997) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997) expounded. It could also be related to capitalist expansion and dispossession stated by Harvey (2003). Their condition points at the looming threat Chatterjee (2007) noted of small peasant agriculture acceding to the larger forces of capital in India. The way the paddy cultivators continue to produce paddy in spite of all the challenges thrown before them by modern developments is similar to how Matsutake mushroom grows in capitalist ruins or life survives in the ruins of capitalism as expounded by Tsing (2015). It is possible to sense in this chapter, the meeting of two different lifeworlds similar to the analysis made by Brosius (1999), Biersack (2006) and Tsing (2015).

Conclusion

Thus, Chapter 6 brings up the challenging circumstances in which the agricultural community produce paddy in Kuttanad. It indicates the transformation of a society located on a transforming terrain and the political ecology behind it. It reveals the tussle between the old and the new formations. The hindrances faced by the traditional community related with their long-established occupation are indications of the changes happening in the society at large. Hence, this chapter sets forth the stage for the next Chapter 7, which looks into the changes happening in the social composition of Kuttanad.

Part II
Chapter 7

Changes in Social Stratifications

The society of Kuttanad has changed along with its physical landscapes. From a region whose inhabitants depended completely on paddy cultivation, Kuttanad has transformed into a region that accommodates people engaged in numerous other occupations and activities, often conflicting with paddy cultivation. Chapters 7 and the next Chapter 8 are closely interconnected and portray the social composition and stratifications I saw at the time of my fieldwork. Chapter 7 introduces the traditional social hierarchy, comprising the different castes and communities that inhabit the region and explains the competitions and contestations among and between them. Chapter 8 explains the rise of class and individualism in the society, which is a consequence of the economic and political dynamisms in Keralam and India and illustrates the different ways people are trying to cope socially with the transformations that are taking place. If the location of a person in the traditional hierarchy is based on birth and values, his/her position in the class hierarchy is supposedly based on wealth. Hence, if the former is based on ascribed status, the latter is ostensibly based on achieved status. Even though the new class society provides hope for people and they consider it as a means to raise their position in the social hierarchy, I show that the new class society is a reproduction of the traditional society. My explanation and analysis are based on the social composition found in the Kuttanad region. Now I proceed to explain the traditional society in Kuttanad.

The Traditional Hierarchy

The traditional Kuttanad society includes mainly the Hindus and the Christians. According to the 2011 Census of India, there are 18 million Hindus in Keralam, that is, 54.9% of the population, 8.9 million Muslims, that is, 26.6% and 6.141 million Christians, that is 18.38% of the population. According to the 2011 Census, 62.25% of the population of Kuttanad region are Hindus, 29.55% are Christians and only 7.86% are Muslims. There are very few Muslims in my study area.⁶⁰ Hence, my informants are mainly Hindus and Christians. The Hindus in the region includes *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar* comprising the various sub-castes among them. I am mentioning my informants only by the main caste categories due to reasons already mentioned in the methodology chapter of this thesis. The Christians mainly include Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. Among the low caste converted Christians, the Latin Catholics were doing well in

⁶⁰ The Muslim population is concentrated more in the towns of Alappuzha, Changanassery and Kottayam.

my study area. The majority of my informants were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. I had only a very few Namboodiri and Tamil Brahmin informants. In the ethnography that follows, it is possible to see that caste operates equally among both the Hindus and Christians in my study area. It points to the fact that even though casteism and the socio-cultural distinction between purity and impurity can be traced to the Hindu religion, it actually permeated into the whole society including other religious groups. I will be discussing this in detail after I present the different castes and communities in the region, to which I now proceed.

Namboodirimar

Among the Hindus, *Namboodirimar* occupy the highest position in the traditional hierarchy in Kuttanad. In the 19th century and the period before that, *Namboodirimar* commanded great respect in society. However, as Gallo (2017) shows there were subdivisions among them into various sub-castes. Hence, there were rich *Namboodirimar* and others from the same caste who served them. Two of the main occupations they were involved in were agriculture and priesthood. The rich *Namboodirimar* were mostly engaged in agriculture and the poor among them served as priests in their temples or worked in their kitchens. However, those occupied with agriculture remained only as landlords, leasing their fields to tenants from castes and communities lower in the hierarchy and never entered the fields. During that time, the tenants in Kuttanad were *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. The socio-economic kinship alliance between *Namboodirimar* and *Nayanmar* resulted in *Namboodirimar* granting tracts of land to the *Nayanmar* (Jeffrey 1976 and Thomas 2018). The privileged status of the Syrian Christians who established themselves mainly as a merchant community and their support for the temple oriented social system made the *Namboodirimar* grant tracts of land to the Syrian Christians also as shown by Thomas (2018). These tenants usually leased in land extending over 4.04 hectares from the *Namboodirimar*. People from castes lower in the hierarchy like the *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar* could not lease in land at that time.

Namboodirimar maintained their high prestige until around the end of the 19th century. The social and political changes that came up in Travancore/Keralam in 19th and 20th centuries, especially the socio-cultural reform movements and the land reforms had its effect on the Namboodiri caste. As Gallo (2017) stated, to a large extent, it is the peculiar social system of the *Namboodirimar* that led to their fall and hindered their social progress. The patrilineal system followed by the Namboodiri caste where only the eldest son could marry in the family and own all the properties belonging to the family created tensions and conflicts within Namboodiri families between the younger and elder sons. Socio-cultural reform movements

among the *Namboodirimar* started in the early years of the 20th century. Even though, the reform movements were directed at the rich aristocratic *Namboodirimar* and did not benefit the poor within the caste, it encouraged many young Namboodiri men and women to break away from their families and peculiar traditions. Around mid-20th century, the caste-based reform movements merged into leftist politics centering on the activities of the Communist Party. If the first wave of *Namboodirimar* who broke from the families joined the reform movements, the second wave and many from the first wave also joined the Communist Party.⁶¹

The land reforms of the 19th and 20th centuries also affected the *Namboodirimar*. The Pattom Proclamation of 1865 by the Travancore Government gave ownership rights to the tenants over the land they were leasing from the government. Hence, the *Nayanmar* and the Syrian Christians who were the tenants of Sirkar Pattom land became landowners. This raised their social position from that of mere tenants to landowners. This was a set back to the social position of the *Namboodirimar*. Now there were other landlords from castes and communities lower to them in the society. Similarly, the 1969 land reforms brought by the Kerala Government also grabbed lands from the *Namboodirimar*, even though many were able to transfer some land to other family members before the reforms were implemented. However, by the time the 1969 reforms came up, the *Namboodirimar* were already relegated in the agricultural sector due to previous land reforms. As the *Namboodirimar* always remained as landlords and never acted as tenants, the 1969 land reforms also benefited more the tenants who were Syrian Christians, the *Nayanmar* and also the *Ezhavanmar* to a lesser extent, as they acted as tenants to the Syrian Christian and Nayar landlords. However, more than the land reforms, it was the peculiar social system of the *Namboodirimar* itself that kept them marginalized.

Unlike in the rest of India, where Brahmins are identified as a class of highly educated and refined subjects, who took advantage of their cultural capital to acquire social, economic and political benefits, the *Namboodirimar* in Keralam remained left behind. As Gallo (2017) shows, between the years 1920 and 1960, when the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, Syrian Christians and to some extent the *Ezhavanmar* took advantage of the opportunities brought before them by the British and the post-colonial developments and made progress, the *Namboodirimar* shied away from all such opportunities (Fuller 1976 and Mencher 1966). In fact, it was those who broke with the family that attained education and was able to achieve mobility among the *Namboodirimar*. In other words, those who aspired for modernity had to break from the family and tradition.

⁶¹ The first Communist Chief Minister of Keralam, EMS Namboodiripad, was himself from the Namboodiri caste.

The Condition of *Namboodirimar* at the time of my Fieldwork

I met only less than twenty *Namboodirimar* during my entire fieldwork period. Hence, my knowledge about them is mainly based on my interviews with them and participant observation. I had a number of Namboodiri friends while doing my graduation in a Catholic college in Kottayam. Apart from that, my knowledge about them is limited. The channel I used to meet the *Namboodirimar* is the temple. As there are *Namboodirimar* engaged as priests in my study area, it was not difficult to find them there. Often such meetings helped me to get in touch with others from the caste. I used to get the chance to go and talk to the priest before or after the main rituals in the temple, when there were not many devotees around. I often met them individually. I used to introduce myself as a researcher and as my name spoke my religion and community, I never had to tell it separately. Whenever I told them that I am a native, all of them used to enquire my family name in the region. As I belong to a former landlord family and as my relatives are still actively engaged in paddy cultivation, most of them knew my family and my relatives. It often eased the situation and the talks that followed used to be friendly and pleasant. Still I sensed some kind of a distance in the interactions and a lack of openness in the communication. It seemed like there was always a consciousness of the difference in the social categories to which we belonged. However, there was always mutual respect in our interactions. My social situation might have eased my communications with the Namboodiri caste. I never felt any diffidence or timidity in going and meeting them. I do not know how it would have been if I belonged to a lower caste and I did not have the social, economic, cultural and educational background that I have now, which strengthened my position in my study area.

The houses of my informants were located near temples in the villages of Champakulam, Moncompu, Chembumpuram, Karumadi, Nedumudi and Ramankari. Four out of the twenty *Namboodirimar* I met who belonged to the former landlord families still remained wealthy and retained respect in the society. I understand that they made use of the opportunities created by the reform movements among the Namboodiri caste. With the demolition of the patrilineal system, they progressively converted their share of the family property into education and professional labour. Six of the twenty *Namboodirimar* were reasonably well off. From what I grasp, they are the ones who broke from the family traditions and followed the path of modernity and progress. The rest of the ten informants remained in a poor situation. Some of those who remained poor were wealthy landlord families in the past. Their decline can be traced in line with what Gallo (2017) has mentioned, that is, mainly their own peculiar social system and their delay to keep pace with the others in the stride towards progress.

Most of these twenty *Namboodirimar* I met and their relatives are engaged in occupations other than paddy cultivation and many have migrated from the region to the neighbouring towns and abroad. Those engaged in paddy cultivation remained only as absentee landlords leasing out their fields mainly to *Nayanmar* or Syrian Christians as before. This indicates that they still cling on to the old alliances and keep a distance with the castes and communities lower than them. The rich and the reasonably well off *Namboodirimar* I met had received good education and some of them occupied some of the high positions in government services, banks, private firms, etc. outside Kuttanad. Some of the poor *Namboodirimar* I met did not even have the money to cultivate paddy in the remaining fields they had. Some of them were still priests in the local temples and found it impossible to live from the meagre income they got from the temples for their services. Hence, seven of them I met did humble jobs, normally associated with the poor low castes and communities. They worked as peons, clerks, auto/taxi drivers, salespersons, watchmen, etc. even in firms owned by lower castes or other communities. Their children were receiving education in the government schools and colleges. I understood that many of the poor among them kept hope in the education of their children.

Nine of my *Namboodiri* informants lived in their old ancestral homes. All these houses were big and built in the traditional architectural style and were called *Illam*. Six of these houses were completely worn out. Even though, those who lived in these worn out *Illangal* (plural for *Illam*) did not have the money to maintain the houses, they continued to live in them, as it was humiliating and distressing to sell ancestral properties, especially ancestral homes. Nevertheless, some of the poor *Namboodirimar* despite humiliation had sold everything and lived in small houses on rent. Often the houses they rented were owned by people from lower castes and communities. The furniture and utensils from the houses sold by the *Namboodirimar* ended up with the antique shop dealers for very cheap price. The economic condition of many of the poor *Namboodirimar* I met was similar to many of the deficit low caste and community households in the region. There were several lower castes and communities like *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians who were economically wealthier than the poor *Namboodirimar*.

I noticed that all the *Namboodirimar*, whether they were rich or poor, kept a distance from the rest of the society and were very reserved in their dealings with other castes and communities. They never mingled much with others and always clung to their own group. They were never seen in the paddy fields where I did most of my fieldwork. Therefore, to meet them, I had to go either to the temple or to their *illam*. During my interactions with them, I grasped that both the rich and the poor *Namboodirimar* are still very proud of their high caste position in the social

hierarchy. K.T. Namboodiri is an absentee landlord in Nedumudi. I contact him through a priest in Moncompu temple. We had a chat-cum-interview in the temple office. Even though he acknowledged the fall of the Namboodiri caste in the society and the new class hierarchy he said, 'Even if we have lost our wealth, we are still *Namboodirimar*.' Even though, it could be said that the *Namboodirimar* are also part of the social struggle for progress, and even if they have not yet succeeded in achieving high positions in the class hierarchy, it seemed that the emergence of the new hierarchy never really bothered them, as they were confident and self-assured of their lineage.

Tamil Brahmananmar

Tamil Brahmin migration from Tamilnadu to Travancore started at the time of the Travancore King Marthanda Varma in the 18th century. The Travancore kings patronized them by granting them land and according them high positions in government services. Their power and presence in the public service became so extensive that the natives became marginalized in the administrative sector. This led to the formulation of the Malayali Memorial in 1891 by the *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians, which was a petition to the Travancore King against the monopoly of the Tamil *Brahmananmar* in the government services. They demanded the inclusion of more natives in the administrative positions. The socio-political condition that brought these otherwise competing castes and communities together against an outside caste is noteworthy. The deficiency of *Namboodirimar* in government services is also noteworthy. As Gallo (2017) shows, they were trapped in their peculiar social system to be part of any movements for progression. The competition for advancement was between Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians. However, it turned out that it was the *Nayanmar* who benefited the most by the Memorial. This was the reason why the *Ezhavanmar* had to submit another petition for themselves in 1896 called the Ezhava Memorial for getting government jobs and other benefits. The Syrian Christians were more into trade, business and other professions that only a few took up government services. However, the hold of the Tamil *Brahmananmar* in government services continued for many more years. Nossiter (1982) noted that in spite of popular petitions, as late as 1974, the presence of Tamil senior civil servants had not ended.

Migration of groups after groups of Tamil *Brahmananmar* to Kuttanad increased in the 19th century with largescale land reclamations, until they formed a small minority in the region as shown by Tharamangalam (1981), Sadasivan (2000) and Rammohan (2006). Being Brahmins, they occupied a high position in the Hindu caste hierarchy in Kuttanad. Sadasivan (2000) states that they were even selected as substitute priests in certain temples. They were granted large

tracts of land by the Travancore kings and the Chempakassery kings of Kuttanad and they soon became landlords. Government service, trade and landownership enabled them to amass wealth and they shortly became the prominent moneylenders in the region in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Verghese 1982, Sadasivan 2000, Rammohan 2006). During that time, like the *Namboodirimar*, they maintained sexual relations with Nayar women and leased their land to tenants who were *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians (Verghese 1982).

Tamil *Brahmananmar* and *Namboodirimar*

In the beginning of my fieldwork among the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, I was perplexed as to who is at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy in Kuttanad, whether the *Namboodirimar* or the Tamil *Brahmananmar*. I brought up my doubt when I met informants from other castes in the region. The Namboodiri, Nayar, Ezhava and Pulaya informants I met in Nedumudi, Pulinkunnu and Chembumpuram held the Tamil *Brahmananmar* as outsiders, since they were from the neighbouring State of Tamilnadu. Hence, they were treated as a caste outside the local caste hierarchy in Kuttanad. I raised this question to the Tamil *Brahmananmar* I met in Pulinkunnu and Moncompu. I understood from them that they considered themselves exclusive and different from the *Namboodirimar* and adhered to their own rituals and customs. I have not seen *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* socializing or mingling with each other in Kuttanad. They keep a distance from one another and with the rest of the society. Some of the Tamil *Brahmananmar* proudly said that both of them are *Brahmins*. Hence, I realized that even though Tamil Brahmin immigrants were so much part of the social system in Kuttanad, there was no particular position for them in the local caste hierarchy. Some considered them equal to the *Namboodirimar* and some considered them as positioned below the *Namboodirimar* and never above them. I felt that implicitly for the *Namboodirimar*, sidelining the Tamil *Brahmananmar* as outsiders enabled them to place themselves on the top of the traditional hierarchy. It felt like for the rest of the castes eliminating one superior caste from the traditional hierarchy lessened their gap to the top. I sensed irritation among most of the castes below the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* hearing my question about the position of the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*. It is the annoyance of castes who consider themselves inferior to none, as stated by Dirks (2001), which is visible in this context.

Unlike the *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar* can be seen always taking advantage of the opportunities to improve their lot. Different from the *Namboodirimar* they made use of the English education offered by the missionaries and the government schools (Jeffrey 1976). Sadasivan (2000) stated that even though Tamil *Brahmananmar* practised caste discriminations more severely than the high castes and communities in Keralam, caste and pollution was not a

problem for them when it came to acquiring education in the schools with other castes and communities. They knew how to move with the changing times. They exploited the development of Kuttanad into a major rice-producing region to their advantage in the 19th and early 20th century and when things started changing, they made use of their education to move out of the region and to acquire decent jobs and safeguard their position.

The Condition of Tamil *Brahmananmar* at the time of my Fieldwork

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I found it difficult to get in touch with the Tamil *Brahmananmar*. I had to make use of my maternal connections to get in touch with a Tamil Brahmin family in Moncompu and Pulinkunnu. My relatives who live in Mampuzhakari had agricultural relations and financial dealings with the Moncompu Tamil Brahmin family in the past and the two families still continue the generations old cordial relations. This is how I contacted them. Through them, I got in touch with a couple of other Tamil Brahmin families in the region. I am fully aware that my social position influenced my interactions with them. I do not know if I would have got a warm welcome in their homes if I were a researcher from a poor low caste/community background. Most the Tamil Brahmin houses are located near temples. I only went to their houses for a couple of hours for conducting interviews and we always sat in the front verandah and talked. They spoke Malayalam mixed with Tamil to me but they spoke Tamil among themselves.

The situation of the few Tamil *Brahmananmar* I came across during my fieldwork, who are living in Kuttanad seemed depreciated outwardly. Most of them lived in partly deteriorated traditional houses called *maddam*. Those who were wealthy and well regarded mostly lived outside Kuttanad in the neighbouring towns and abroad. It is mainly the elder generation, above the age of sixty who are mostly left behind in Kuttanad. They owned paddy fields but leased it out and lived as absentee landlords. Like the *Namboodirimar*, they were never seen in the paddy fields of Kuttanad. During my interactions with them, I realized that even if the elder generation lived in a state of decline in Kuttanad, most of their children and grandchildren were doing well outside Kuttanad. As almost everyone from this caste is educated, most of the young generation have taken up jobs and professions other than agriculture outside the region. Many of them occupy high positions in different professions. M.S. Swaminathan who is called the 'Father of Green Revolution in India' for his role in introducing and developing high-yielding varieties in India and the founder of the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation is a Tamil Brahmin from Moncompu in my study area. This is a good example of the high positions they occupy in the Indian society through their educational achievements.

The Tamil *Brahmananmar* I met in Kuttanad were very proud of their caste and their educational achievements. Those whom I met told me about the high occupational positions their children and grandchildren held. They narrated their history as landlords and moneylenders and the high position they held in the region until the rise of Communism. From our conversations, I could understand the ill feeling they had towards the Communists. The land reforms of 1969 had grabbed most of the land belonging to the Tamil Brahmin landlords in the region. As the Tamil Brahmins practised harsh caste discriminations, the low castes and communities in the region loathed them (Sadasivan 2000). Hence, the relation between the Tamil Brahmin landlords and the Communist Party that included their former labourers was always on the verge of conflict. This seriously influenced and hindered their involvement in paddy cultivation in the region and led to their decline as prominent agriculturalists in Kuttanad. When their families realized that they could not continue paddy cultivation successfully, they sold most of their land to Syrian Christians and *Ezhavanmar* as shown by Varghese (1982).

M.C. Ramachandran is an old Tamil Brahmin landlord who lives in Pulinkunnu with his wife. Their son was an editor of a Malayalam Daily Newspaper in Ernakulam. Their son and family lived in Ernakulam and often visited the parents. Ramachandran and his wife mostly stayed at Pulinkunnu. They said that they stayed in Ernakulam at times of floods in Kuttanad. Like the other Tamil *Brahmananmar* I met, Ramachandran was completely against the Communist Party and their activities and believed that the Communists still had the old grudge towards their caste. During one of my visits to his house, while we were talking, an Ezhavan who had come to pluck the coconuts in his courtyard came to greet us. I noticed that he had a very bold stature and talked with confidence. Ramachandran, on the other hand, talked very politely to him. After the man left, Ramachandran turned to me and said, 'We have to be very careful and tactful when talking and dealing with these people. He is a Communist. If incidents arise, where I have to raise my voice, he will come with a red flag the next day and place it somewhere in my property and demand something and start a strike. Why should I invite trouble?'

In a way, the Ezhavan who came to pluck coconuts was fully aware of his social position when compared to the Tamil Brahmin. Obviously, it is lower in the social hierarchy. He was also aware that the Tamil Brahmin is also aware of this. My social position was unknown to him. The Tamil Brahmin knows that the Ezhavan knows his superior social position and hence, he does not need to express it overtly. The Ezhavan's Communist background gave him the boldness to disregard traditional moulds and come forward to talk. His political context provided him a stand in the social setting. But the persons involved are not unaware of the social positions. His comment about what would happen if he provokes the Communist shows that I

being a Syrian Christian and from a former landlord family, he assumes that I know the context and approves it. Hence, I realized that the Tamil *Brahmananmar* in Kuttanad knew that their glorious days in the region is over. However, making use of their educational accomplishments, they are moving out of the region and placing themselves in high positions in occupations, which in turn helped them to maintain their high position in the social hierarchy.

Nayanmar

The next in the caste hierarchy, below the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* are the *Nayanmar*. In Kuttanad, until the second half of the 19th century, along with the Syrian Christians, they were the tenants of the *sirkar* (government) pattom land and the land of the *Namboodirimar*. Nearly half of the rice growing land in Travancore was *sirkar* pattom land, which gave the government the rights of a *janmi* (landlord). The majority of the tenants of the *sirkar* pattom land were *Nayanmar*. As the tenants considered the pattom land as having no value beyond the rice it produced and as the government could not sell the land for nonpayment of rent, in 1865 the government made the Pattom Proclamation, granting full ownership rights to the tenants of *sirkar* pattom land (Jeffrely 1976). This made the tenants, who were mainly *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians unexpectedly acquire saleable, mortgageable land. It suddenly raised their social position from being mere tenants to that of landlords like the *Namboodirimar* and the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, who were the only landlord castes until then.

However, the Pattom Proclamation, the change in the value of land and the spread of cash economy benefited the Syrian Christians more than the *Nayanmar* who followed the matrilineal *marumakkathayam* system of inheritance.⁶² As in the *marumakkathayam* system, the property and assets of *tharavad* was held in common by all members, and no individual could claim his or her share of the joint property, even though the *Nayanmar* became owners of land, they could not raise capital for commercial and other enterprises. The condition of the *Namboodirimar* was also similar. In the patrilineal system followed by them, only the eldest son could marry in the family and own all the properties belonging to the family. As a result, nobody else could gain any personal benefits from properties owned by the family. On the other hand, the Syrian Christians who did not have any complex family institutions and were interested in trade and business could venture into new economic pursuits.

As in the case of *Namboodirimar*, the traditional social system of the *Nayanmar* hindered their progress in the early 19th century. When *Nayanmar* were drowning in the complexities of the

⁶² In the matrilineal *marumakkathayam* system, all members of a *tharavad* (Nayar household) were descended from a common female ancestor, but the management of *tharavad* affairs vested in the eldest male member, the *karanavan*.

tharavad system, the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, Syrian Christians and *Ezhavanmar* started improving their economic position. This created tension in Nayar families and it ultimately led to the decline of the matrilineal system (Fuller 1976 and Jeffrey 1976). Before long, *Nayanmar* took to education and they became the best educated among the Malayalis. They got into government jobs and in course of time, *Nayanmar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* dominated the government services (Jeffrey 1976). When land ownership and government services were the two strengths of the *Nayanmar*, the Syrian Christians, apart from landownership moved into divergent commercial and economic enterprises. The *Ezhavanmar* followed the Syrian Christians. The advancement of the Syrian Christians and *Ezhavanmar* became a threat to the *Nayanmar*. The competition between *Nayanmar*, Syrian Christians and *Ezhavanmar* continued since then in Kuttanad.

The Condition of *Nayanmar* at the time of my Fieldwork

The *Nayanmar* found in Kuttanad includes Nair, Kurup, Pilla, Menon, Kartha, Kaimal and Panikkar. Even though the Veluthedathu and Vilakkithala found in Kuttanad consider themselves as *Nayanmar* and are included in the caste, the others within the caste do not recognize them as I have already mentioned in the methodology chapter of this thesis. Even if, these several sub-castes are present in Kuttanad, whenever I asked them their caste, they only told me that they are *Nayanmar*. I being a Syrian Christian and considering the social, economic and political situations between *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians, there were many vulnerabilities involved in asking them more and so I abstained myself from doing so.

Unlike in the case of *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*, it was not at all difficult for me to find *Nayanmar* during fieldwork. I found them engaged in all kinds of economic activities. *Nayanmar*, especially *Nayar* men, were present in paddy cultivation as landlords, absentee landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, and even as cultivator-labourers. They engaged in cultivation activities along with the other castes and communities. The cultivator-labourers among them were poor who also engaged in manual labour but they only worked in their own fields. I assume that they are from the two sub-caste categories who are not considered as *Nayanmar* by the others. None of the less privileged former landlords from this caste worked in the fields. The rest of the *Nayanmar* I found who were present in the paddy fields were sociable with the other castes and communities like the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. Here, 'sociable' means they talked well and cooperated with everyone regarding paddy cultivation. This does not mean that they developed any close friendships with others. This is one peculiarity related with paddy cultivation in Kuttanad. As it involves the cooperation of several people, it is impossible to shun others as

shown in Chapter 5. Especially with the rise in power of the labour unions and the political parties in which labourers are members, if land owners misbehave, then the labourers, who are limited in number, will not turn up for work. As a person with relatives and friends engaged in paddy cultivation, I know that this happens in the field. Hence, it becomes absolutely necessary for everyone to cooperate and be sociable. However, I realized that the high castes and communities involved in paddy cultivation were sociable, at the same time they kept a distance from the low castes and communities.

There are also a number of *Nayanmar* in the neighbourhood of my ancestral house in Champakulam. My family kept good relations with the *Nayanmar* in the neighbourhood and in the locality but I have not seen any close relationships between the families. Even though there was great cooperation between the families on various festive and ceremonial occasions, there was still a distance in the relationship. It could be the caste/community delineations, which hindered such friendships. I met rich and poor *Nayanmar* in my study area and all of them are generally regarded as high caste in the region. It was not just the former underprivileged sub-castes who remained disadvantaged at the time of my fieldwork. Even though the land reforms of 1969 benefited many *Nayanmar* who were tenants, it adversely affected many former landlords from this caste, by grabbing the large stretches of land they had. I am not stating that all the former landlords from this caste have economically fallen down but it is true that almost all of them lost their past glory as undisputed landlords. Some of them lost wealth due to debts that were not always related with paddy cultivation but due to divergent other reasons. Some of them, I learned, did not succeed in the enterprises they initiated and lost their wealth. Likewise, there were several reasons why some among the former Nayar landlords lost their wealth. Still the former landlord families remain respected in the region, whether they are wealthy or not. The members of those families are also aware of this esteem they have in the region.

Education helped almost all the *Nayanmar* to lead a relatively comfortable life in line with the new lifestyles in the region. Some of the former poor Nayar families have acquired wealth through education and migration. However, the former rich *Nayanmar* have also acquired money in similar manner and hence it cannot be said that education and migration created equality. Education enabled them to acquire jobs in government services, banks, educational institutions, etc. Hence, among the well to do *Nayanmar*, I met government servants, engineers, doctors, teachers, professors, bank managers, clerks, emigrants and their families and those engaged in other similar professions. There are quite a number of nurses also from his caste working both inside and outside Keralam. Many nurses in my study area from relatively poor and poor Nayar families have acquired money by working in the Gulf. Most of the wealthy

Nayanmar engaged themselves in paddy cultivation as landlords, absentee landlords and landlord-cultivators. Among the relatively poor and poor *Nayanmar*, there were drivers, watchmen, maintenance workers, salespersons and peons.

In Kuttanad, among those living in the region, the *Nayanmar* seemed to be in a much better and prosperous state than many of the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*. They revealed their wealth and showed their authority more than the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*. As mentioned earlier, most of the Tamil *Brahmananmar* who were doing well lived outside the region. Whereas there were *Nayanmar* who were doing well both inside and outside Kuttanad. They lived in better-kept houses, which in itself gave a better impression. However, it must be noted that apart from those engaged in agriculture and doing well, the others who were doing well lived in the region and worked outside. There were not many who were successful in occupations other than agriculture in the region. I met some who were doing well in the tourism industry in the region. They were running homestays in their traditional houses. There were also a few who owned houseboats. I also met some engaged in commercial activities like those owning commercial buildings, which they sometimes rented out and they also made wealth through their economic activities. I noticed that many of those who lived in the region engaged in activities involving land reclamations and actions increasing the pollution levels in the region, in their pursuit to increase wealth.

I came to know that outside Kuttanad, there are *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* from the region who were working under the *Nayanmar*. However, this was not visible in the region. Obviously, this is related with shame. There is more anonymity and privacy in urban spaces than native rural areas. Nevertheless, there were also *Nayanmar* who were working under castes who were below them in the caste hierarchy. Mini, a Nayar woman from Champakulam was my neighbour during a period of my life when I lived in Thiruvananthapuram. She was working as a peon at a research institution in Thiruvananthapuram where the Director was a Latin Catholic. She belonged to one of the lower sub-castes among the *Nayanmar*. According to what she said, her parents did manual labour in the paddy fields in Kuttanad. As Thiruvananthapuram is a big city far away from Kuttanad and as there are several others from all parts of Keralam living and working in Thiruvananthapuram, I did not feel that she had any embarrassment in working under a Latin Catholic. She seemed glad to get such a job with a regular salary. It could be because she belonged to a low rank within the Nayar caste and was from a poor background that she seemed content.

Similarly, Divakaran is a Nayar man from Chembumpuram who is working as a security guard in a restaurant run by an Ezhavan in Kottayam. I know both of them because I am a regular visitor to this restaurant. The Ezhava owner seemed to treat Divakaran with respect even though he maintained his position as the owner. According to what Divakaran told me, his family had considerable extend of land in Kuttanad in the past. Due to debts, his family lost all their land. They sold it to Syrian Christians and *Ezhavanmar*. Even though Divakaran was aware of his higher social position, he was equally aware of his low economic position. Similarly, even though the Ezhavan was aware of his high economic position, he was equally aware of his low social position. Hence, both of them acknowledged each other, at the same time, also keeping a distance. Likewise, there are ample other examples of *Nayanmar* working under castes that are lower to them in the caste hierarchy. However, all the *Nayanmar* I met, no matter what their economic condition, were very proud of belonging to the Nayar caste. Even though many whined about their low economic plight, they never complained of being a Nayar.

During my visit to the Nair Service Society (NSS) in Changanassery, I interviewed some members of the Society and collected secondary sources regarding the caste. I learned from them that organizationally too *Nayanmar* are powerful. NSS is a powerful organization of the *Nayanmar*. As of 2010 the NSS consists of 58 Taluk Unions, 5300 *Karayogam* (village communities), 4232 *Vanitha Samajam* (women's associations) and 2466 *Bala Samajam* (children's associations) spread all over Keralam. The NSS has several schools under its supervision in different parts of the State. They also have branches of the NSS in the other States of India and also abroad for the *Nayanmar* working or settled outside Keralam. I found them making efforts to maintain their respected position in the society in both the caste and class hierarchy by trying to acquire wealth.

Ezhavanmar

Ezhavanmar comes next in the caste hierarchy after the *Nayanmar*. Until the late 19th century, even though a small minority among them were regarded as elite, the majority were considered as low caste untouchables. While the elite among them worked as Ayurvedic physicians, teachers, tenant cultivators and small traders, the majority remained illiterate and landless. They worked either as agricultural labourers or engaged in their stigmatized traditional caste occupation of tending coconut palms and exploiting its products like toddy, arrack and coir. They were economically and politically weak. However, in the late 19th century, when the demand for coconut products in Europe and America increased, the *Ezhavanmar* were able to take advantage of the new opportunities and the emerging cash economy. Even though the large coconut gardens in Kuttanad were owned by *Namboodirimar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians,

the expertise of *Ezhavanmar* were required to process the coconuts, and their labour became indispensable to the merchants established in Alappuzha town. The *Ezhavanmar* slowly began to make profit and started owning coir factories. Jeffrey (1976) wrote that the growth of the cash economy opened up areas where *Ezhavanmar* could profitably employ themselves without coming into contact with high castes. Such pursuits gave them an economic advantage over high castes. This period saw the rise of a small middle class within the Ezhava community who joined the caste's existing elite (Jeffrey 1976, Osella and Osella 1999).

Under the influence of the new middle class among the *Ezhavanmar*, several social reform movements began in the early 20th century, the most successful being the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalanayogam (SNDP) under Sree Narayana Guru. Under the insistence of Sree Narayana Guru, the *Ezhavanmar* began to give importance to social mobility. Their first main goal was to give up their much stigmatized caste occupation of toddy tapping, which tagged them as a low caste. Even though, it was a highly profitable business, they strived to move away from it, in order to unknit themselves from the low caste tag. The second main goal was to get away from manual labour in the paddy fields, which brought them closer to the low caste *Pulayanmar*. The third main goal was to get nearer to the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians by imitating their life and lifestyles. Their reference group for prestige accumulation and caste mobility was *Nayanmar* and when they sought avenues for capital accumulation and class mobility, they looked towards Syrian Christians (Jeffrey 1976 and Osella and Osella 2000). As an intermediary caste, the mobility drive was stronger among the *Ezhavanmar*. In the course of time, they gained access to education and employment in public offices.⁶³ Their intermediate position in the social hierarchy enabled them to engage in a wide range of economic activities that helped them to accumulate wealth. Whatever they did since then were aimed at upward social mobility.

The Condition of *Ezhavanmar* at the time of my Fieldwork

In Kuttanad, the only sub-caste among the *Ezhavanmar* is Panikkar. However, all the *Ezhavanmar* I met called themselves *Ezhavanmar* itself. Unlike in the case of *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*, it was not difficult for me to find *Ezhavanmar* as they were everywhere in the region, engaged in divergent occupations. They were seen making use of all the new economic opportunities that came in their way. They tried to engage in activities that gave them economic and symbolic capital. I found wealthy, average and poor Ezhava families

⁶³ As conversion to Christianity did not hold the promise of elevation to the status of the Syrian Christians but carried the treat of debasement to the level of *Pulayanmar*, the majority of the *Ezhavanmar* abstained from getting converted to Christianity. However, they made use of the educational opportunities provided by the Christians to get educated (Jeffrey 1976).

during my fieldwork. By wealthy, I mean, those who have a sound income that enables them to shape their lives in line with the emerging consumer culture and related lifestyle. By average family, I mean those who are not so well off but still are able to lead a socially acceptable life, which is assessed in accordance with the new consumer culture and living styles. Poor families are those who do not have a steady income and who find it economically difficult to be part of the new emerging consumeristic lifestyles.

Migration, especially to the Gulf, was a major source of economic and social change among many of my Ezhava informants. However, as the level of education among the *Ezhavanmar* was low (Osella and Osella 2000), they mostly succeeded in getting low profile jobs abroad when compared to emigrant *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians who had better educational qualifications. Hence, the income of Nayar and Syrian Christian emigrants were more than the Ezhava emigrants I met. The monthly salary of a Nayar physician working in UAE was 47,100 AED (Rs. 968,080) and the monthly salary of a Syrian Christian chef working in Kuwait was 1,220 KWD (Rs. 299,035) whereas the monthly salary of an Ezhava electrician working in UAE was only 2500 AED (Rs. 51,425). However, the pay scale being higher abroad than in Keralam, the emigrant *Ezhavanmar* earned more than their counterparts in the State. When the monthly salary of an electrician in UAE was 2500 AED (Rs. 51,425), his counterpart in Keralam earned only around Rupees 15,000 per month.

The rich and average families included government servants, emigrants and their families, engineers, teachers, nurses, those engaged in petty business and trade, and those running hotels and catering services. They also included those who owned taxis, trucks, buses and private ambulances. Some of them were also engaged in toddy business. Most of the toddy shops in my study area are owned by them. Many of the *Ezhavanmar* from poor families who are engaged in toddy tapping on a full time or part time basis worked for the toddy shops owned by the rich *Ezhavanmar*. Most of these inhabitants were engaged in paddy cultivation also. To some of them, cultivation was a secondary occupation and they remained as landlords or absentee landlords leasing out their land mainly to Ezhava cultivators. Others were directly engaged in the various operations related with cultivation. They owned pump sets and machines used for paddy cultivation, which they rented out to those who needed them, irrespective of castes and communities. Some worked as pumping contractors.

I did not see any Ezhava men working as agricultural labourers at the time of my fieldwork. On the other hand, an increasing number of Ezhava men from poor and average families were seen engaged in paddy cultivation as machine operators and cultivators leasing in land. They leased

in land from *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. I comprehended that engaging in non-manual labour related with paddy cultivation like for example, becoming cultivators leasing in land, machine operators, those renting pump sets and machines, and pumping contractors were considered socially more acceptable and respectable than manual labour in the paddy fields. It was being considered as an act of upward mobility from the state of manual labour among the *Ezhavanmar*. The *Ezhavanmar* did not show signs of completely moving out of paddy cultivation. Maybe it is because Kuttanad is predominantly an agricultural region. They were only distancing themselves from manual labour in the paddy fields, which associated them with the *Pulayanmar*, at the same time, engaging in activities where the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians were operating. Hence, they prevailed as landlords, absentee landlords, cultivators leasing in land from high castes and communities, renting machines and pump sets, working as machine operators, pump contractors, etc. which gave them an equal footing in the occupation of agriculture with the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians in the region.

It was only the women from poor Ezhava families who were seen working as agricultural labourers in my study area. Some of them worked only in their own fields and some also worked as hired labourers. The poor cultivators had female family members working as agricultural labourers but the averagely rich cultivators seldom sent their women as hired labourers, even though, some were seen working in their own fields. The men in poor families were engaged in divergent petty occupations like headload work, driving, plumbing, electrical work, operating the machines in paddy fields, toddy tapping, etc. Most of them were waiting for a 'chance' to go abroad, mainly to the Gulf to make money, similar to what is written by Osella and Osella (2000). It has to be noted that these inhabitants who were waiting for a 'chance', did not have high educational qualifications. Most of those whom I met had only studied until plus-two or were drop outs who did not complete graduation. The Employment Exchange registration details of Kuttanad region during the years 2015, 2016 and 2017 shows that compared to the other castes and communities, the OBC Hindu category enrolled their names for employment immediately after their tenth standard, plus-two, graduation and post-graduation. This shows their eagerness to get employed in occupations other than paddy cultivation. Registering names at the Employment Office immediately after the tenth standard points to the fact that not many among them took up higher education like the high castes and communities. This actually made them less qualified for jobs with high salaries. Migration and remittances are cleverly utilized by Ezhava families to move out of paddy fields, by starting new petty trades or businesses in the region for their family members. Hence, they were found exploiting and utilizing the developments around to move out of the two despised occupations they have been associated

with. However, even if they have come a long way towards redefining themselves as a low caste, they still have not succeeded in removing their low caste tag.⁶⁴

The *Ezhavanmar* I met appeared equally or even more determined than the *Nayanmar* to achieve progress. They were very industrious and ready to do any work in order to make money. Saji and his family were *Ezhavanmar* with whom I had contact during my fieldwork. He had his mother, wife and two small children in his house. Saji runs a toddy shop in Pulinkunnu. In addition to the toddy shop, he also owned two trucks. Besides that, he also owned a car and a bike for personal use. He had a number of people from the Ezhava caste itself working under him to help in his business. His trucks brought sand from the Western Ghats for construction purposes in the region. He revealed to me that he has helped many to reclaim paddy fields. He was seen all the time busy working. Nevertheless, both he and his family were very happy with the way his business was flourishing. I met a number of busy, hardworking *Ezhavanmar* who were keen on earning wealth like Saji. An important detail that has to be noted here is that in their urge for social mobility, they do not seem to care much for the environment. The statement that he has helped many to fill up the paddy fields is a good example for this. Nevertheless, the 'many' includes people from other castes and communities also. Similarity, I noticed that many of the new commercial buildings and shops started by people from this caste were situated on newly reclaimed land. However, this does not mean that people from other castes and communities are not responsible for ecological imbalances created by developments. I found several others from several other castes and communities equally involved in similar activities.

Amassing wealth was one of the major means adopted by my informants to accomplish social progress. Those who made money and had become wealthy were enthusiastic to display their wealth before other castes and communities. They were trying to tactically use the new consumer culture in Kerala to exhibit their wealth and progress. As stated by Osella and Osella (2000), the *Ezhavanmar* saw consumption as an arena for capital conversion and prestige embodiment. They built concrete modern style houses, bought four wheelers and two wheelers and tried to possess as much consumer goods as possible. They invested in property and gold. Both men and women wore thick gold ornaments. I observed men from this caste wearing gold chain and they kept their shirts open in such a way that others could see their chain. They wore gold bracelets and rings with precious stones attached to it. Women wore gold chain, earrings, bangles, rings and anklets. All these parading is to show others that they now have wealth. By this, they are also trying to position themselves high in the class hierarchy. So an attempt is being made to use wealth (achieved status) in order to relegate caste (ascribed status). They

⁶⁴ Under the Government of India's system of positive discrimination, they are categorized as OBC.

involved in strategic consumption and had short-term and long-term goals of social mobility. They strived towards improving theirs and children's lives (Osella and Osella 2000). *Ezhavanmar* are a strongly organized caste like the *Nayanmar*. SNDP is a powerful organization in the region. Even though they did not seem to have the same pride in their own caste like the *Nayanmar*, I grasped that they have a strong community spirit. However, I realized that even though, they showed great confidence and poise, they were fully aware of their position in the caste hierarchy. Also were they aware of the impression the high castes and communities had towards them. Still, I had the feeling that they kept hope on the new class hierarchy, that someday, it would replace caste hierarchy.

Pulayanmar

Pulayanmar comes below the *Ezhavanmar* in the caste hierarchy in Kuttanad. They were the slave castes in the region. They were untouchable agricultural labourers and poor from the past. Being the most degraded and polluted in the caste hierarchy, they suffered all kinds of aversion and deprivation at the hands of higher castes and communities. The initial steps to improve the social position of *Pulayanmar* were taken by the Protestant missionaries in the 19th century. Under the missionary influence, the British government abolished slavery in Travancore in 1855. Mohan (2015) wrote that if the missionary initiatives had not been there, the slave castes would have remained oppressed for a very long time, as the nationalist elites were not concerned about the problems of caste oppression until the oppressed themselves raised it. However, as the abolition of slavery was not followed by any economic or social welfare measures from the State, the condition of *Pulayanmar* continued as before and they remained as bonded labourers under their former landlords as explained by Tharamanagalam (1981) and George (1992).

The missionaries started giving education to the *Pulayanmar*. The interaction of the *Pulayanmar* with the missionaries helped to bring them within the purview of colonial modernity. Even if the education they gave was religious in nature, it provided the slaves with new ideas and worldviews, which became the basis of the social movements that started among them as pointed out by Mohan (2015). Mohan noted that the new notions of cleanliness and bodily practices introduced by the missionaries made them appear socially presentable and this was carried forward by many of the later reformers within the slave castes (Mohan 2015). As a result of the initiatives of both the missionaries and the social reformers like Ayyankali, who was a Pulaya himself, the Travancore government was persuaded to introduce welfare measures and schemes to uplift the depressed classes. Thus, *Pulayanmar* acquired several rights formerly denied to them.

While the reform measures were progressing in the first half of the 20th century, the Travancore society itself was undergoing a process of modernization. Due to industrialization and urbanization, new occupations outside the traditional occupational structure emerged. Mohan (2015) stated that acquisition of land, education and new skills were essential to the onward march of the slave caste communities to evolve themselves as free people. In order to set themselves free from the hold of caste slavery, the *Pulayanmar* understood that they should move out of the paddy fields and do away with their position as manual labourers, which tied them to the old structures of slavery and the vices related with caste system and that they should have ownership over land. This remained their fundamental goal. Let me now illustrate how I found them during my fieldwork.

The Condition of *Pulayanmar* at the time of my Fieldwork

In spite of all efforts towards social advancement among the *Pulayanmar*, the bulk of the agricultural labourers I met in the field were from the Pulaya caste. They formed the majority among the hired labourers. There were both men and women working as hired labourers. When it comes to manual labour, hired labour was the most degraded state in paddy cultivation at the time of my fieldwork. It signified poverty and impurity at the same time. Hence, the primary goal of all low castes and communities who were engaged in paddy cultivation had been to escape from hired labour in the paddy fields. Manual labour in one's own field was less tainted than hired labour because it signified ownership of property. This was a reason why *Ezhavanmar*, *Nayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians who sometimes engaged in manual labour made sure that neither they nor their women worked in others' fields even if they had to work in their own fields.

Unlike in the case of *Ezhavanmar*, I met very few *Pulayanmar* leasing in land from higher castes and communities. Even if overtly the relation seemed fine, I could sense a strain in the relation between the few Pulaya cultivators and higher castes and communities from whom they leased in land. I assume it is the old memories connected with slavery embedded in the minds of everyone and the region that is producing such a tension. However, I found several Pulaya men engaged in cultivation as machine operators and pumping workers. As in the case of *Ezhavanmar*, it was an attempt from their part to move out of the fields as manual labourers. But unlike in the case of *Ezhavanmar*, who managed to some extent in liberating themselves from manual labour tag, it did not help the *Pulayanmar* from eliminating the slave caste taint. This could be a reason why *Pulayanmar* preferred engaging in non-agricultural activities more. Almost none of the young generation from this caste, below the age of thirty-five could be seen working in the paddy fields.

Land ownership is important for the low castes because it denoted a rise from their former state of landlessness, which again depicted their low position in the hierarchy. However, some of the *Pulayanmar* remained unfortunate even when it comes to land ownership. I saw many from this caste still remaining landless or owning only tiny bits of land on the main road sides or on the outer bunds of the paddy fields. It exposes the failure of the Kerala land reforms of 1969. Devika (2013) stated that the successful struggle for land reforms led by the CPI (M) brought gains in productive land to the tenants and not to the agricultural workers who were not only the main supporters and participants of the struggle, but also the actual tillers of the land. She pointed out that they received minimal gains in the form of small house plots and welfare, not productive assets. However, there were many other Pulaya labourers who owned land. All the *Pulayanmar* who worked in the paddy fields that belonged to my ancestral family owned land. According to my uncle who lives in our ancestral house in Champakulam, each of them were allotted 10 cents at the time of the implementation of land reforms in the 1970s. I have not heard of my family deceitfully distributing land among our relatives to escape land reforms. According to what I know, they honestly allocated their excess land among their labourers. Most of the *Pulayanmar* who were formerly related to our family still lives in the region and we still have cordial relations between us. So obviously, those who owned land held a slightly better position than the landless hired labourers.

Apart from those *Pulayanmar* who engaged in paddy cultivation as manual labourers, I met several others who made use of the opportunities of education to move away from the paddy fields. I met several *Pulayanmar* in Kottayam, Changanassery, Alappuzha, Moncompu, Nedumudi, Kavalam, etc. who were employed in government services in both low and high positions - mainly low positions. They were employed as clerks in Village Offices, Taluk Offices and District Collectorates. Some were even employed as Village Officers and Taluk Officers.⁶⁵ Many of my informants were the children and grandchildren of those *Pulayanmar* who had agricultural relations with my family in Kuttanad. I noticed that there were not any District Collectors and bureaucrats above the level of Taluk officers in the government services from the Pulaya caste. This points to the fact that even though, the social, economic and political changes empowered the low castes and communities in many ways, a major portion of the high positions of power and employment are still occupied by high castes and communities. Zachariah (2016: 16) showed that the proportion of working population employed in

⁶⁵ The State of Kerala is divided for administrative purposes into Districts, Taluks and Villages. Chief Minister is the head of the State. Below him is the Collector, who is the head of the District; below him is the Taluk Officer who is the head of the Taluk and at the bottom there is the Village Officer who is the head of the Village. Each District, Taluk and Village has its own Collector, Taluk Officer and Village Officer. In Kerala, there are 14 districts, 75 taluks and 1674 villages.

government or semi-government jobs was 23.1% among *Namboodirimar*, 16.9% among *Nayanmar* and 13.3% among the Christian denominations. Zachariah has not shown the figures of *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar* but his study exposes the presence of higher castes and communities in government services, which hints the probability of them occupying high positions.

Let me show this through an ethnographic account. Kuttappan is a Pulaya agricultural labourer in Kavalam. I met him in the paddy fields in the village when I was making my usual strolls in the region. Since, then we were in touch throughout my research period. He had two daughters. He did not have the money to send his children to prominent English medium private schools in towns and so he taught them in Malayalam medium government schools in Kavalam. In Kerala, English medium private schools are much more popular for its high standards in education than government run schools. Therefore, people who have the money to afford private schools send their children to private schools. Kuttappan's neighbour, Chandy, is a wealthy Syrian Christian. Chandy is also my informant. I used to visit his house whenever I visited Kuttappan. Both of them were in good terms and Kuttanad worked in the paddy fields owned by Chandy. Chandy had a daughter whom he had sent to one of the most prominent English medium schools in Kottayam. After schooling, Chandy's daughter had more opportunities available to her, as she received a good educational base and spoke very good English. She acquired campus selection and was subsequently employed in one of the famous US based BPOs in Bangalore with a sound income.

On the other hand, one of Kuttappan's daughter, after schooling, started working as a sales girl in one of the local textile shops, earning a very meagre amount per month. The other daughter got employed in a local internet café and was also earning only a very small amount per month. This specified further the general view the *Pulayanmar* I met in Kuttanad had that the higher castes and communities have the social, economic and political power to avail themselves of the best of everything. The lower castes lack that power and so remain suppressed. Devika (2013) has shed light on the fact that the Dalits' success rates and ability to compete with candidates from better-endowed communities remained poor. She asserted that Dalits and tribal people could not take advantage of emergent opportunities in the global labour market. The case I have presented here indicates Devika's assertion. This also indicated the hold the rich high castes and communities have even in the new class hierarchy.

Compared to the higher castes and communities with better social and economic capital, the educational possibilities of *Pulayanmar* were very limited. Even though, those whom I met

were fully aware of their demoted position in government services, they seemed content and proud with their (low) jobs in the government sector. I understand that they consider themselves fortunate to get out from the paddy fields, which chained generations and generations of their ancestors into slavery. Hence, children of many of my Pulaya informants from the agricultural community were seen striving to pass the various competitive exams to the different posts in the government services. Even though the majority remained in low positions in government services, there are certain cases of *Pulayanmar* achieving immense success and holding high positions of power. K.R Narayanan, the tenth President of India and the ninth Vice-President of India was a Pulaya from Kottayam District in Keralam. K.G. Balakrishnan, the former Chief Justice of India was a Pulayan from Vaikom in Kottayam District. They were the role models for many children from the Pulaya caste I met, who were striving for government services.

In addition to government employees, there are also teachers and lecturers from the Pulaya caste in government schools, colleges and universities across Keralam. Not many from this caste are employed in private schools and colleges. I have met several students from this caste doing Masters and PhD studies in the different universities in Keralam. They were all trying to employ themselves in new occupations that were outside the caste system. Still, I realized that even though a minority were seen making use of the opportunities before them to make social advancements, the majority of the *Pulayanmar*, especially the women, remained just as literates and did not pursue higher education. They ended up doing low-grade jobs in the region like working in internet cafes, participating in works related with *thozhilurappu* or working as sales girls and helpers in local kindergatens called *anganawaadi*, or beauty parlours, etc.

Studies show that the enrollment of students from the scheduled castes in higher education to be low. Scaria (2009 and 2014) pointed out that notwithstanding Kerala's impressive human development indicators, huge inequalities exist in the educational attainments of the population, especially that of the Scheduled Castes. She showed that the Scheduled Castes are still at the bottom of the rankings in enrolment in higher education, despite the adoption of a positive discrimination policy and educational subsidy by the State. It could be the coldness arising from the realization that no matter how much they try, their position will remain low in the social hierarchy, which took away their drive for achieving higher education. Or else, it could be the generations old traumatized and distressed nature that prevents them from seeking higher education. It was a time when one of my Pulaya agricultural labourer women's son from Champakulam failed in the tenth standard exam. She had told me before that her son was writing the public exam that year. So when the result came, I enquired about it and after letting me know that he failed, she said, 'How will he pass, he has the an agricultural labourer's brain'.

This point at their distressed evaluation of themselves and this kind of a valuation affect their aspiration for higher education.

I also met a number of NRIs and their families from this caste. They were working mainly in the Gulf. As in the case of *Ezhavanmar*, due to low educational qualifications, they worked in low grade jobs abroad and hence were not able to earn as much as the highly qualified higher castes and communities. The Pulaya immigrants earned lower than the Ezhava immigrants I met. However, as the *Pulayanmar* earned more than others from their caste in Keralam, they were in a better economic position than many others in their caste. Many of the *Pulayanmar* who had a regular salary were seen having a decent life in the region. Even though they were unable to reach the status level of the many higher castes and communities, they strived to be part of the emerging consumer culture and tried to lead a comfortable life.

Maniyan is a Pulaya government employee from Champakulam. His house is located near my ancestral house. He lived a reasonably comfortable life in his newly constructed concrete house. As a road now passes by the side of his house, he owned a Maruthi car. He had many of the household appliances available now in the market like television, blender, fridge, etc. I visited his house many times during my fieldwork period to talk with him and his family. Even though both of us knew our family backgrounds very well, we talked openly about caste inequalities. In this case, the closeness of our families through generations of agricultural relations helped us to talk straightforwardly. From his statements, his acknowledgement of the social position of his caste is evident. Once, he told me that even though people like him had ‘good’ jobs and were happy about their achievements, they still faced many discriminations and inequalities in various life circumstances. He said, ‘We have come a long way. We still need to come up.’ When I asked him what he meant by ‘coming up’, he said that as long as the higher castes and communities dominated the hierarchy, low castes like the *Pulayanmar* will remain suppressed. In his view, only education and wealth could lift up the lower castes. His statement indicates the hope and the possibilities of the people from the low castes to rise in the new class hierarchy.

All the *Pulayanmar* I met who were employed in occupations other than paddy cultivation were still directly or indirectly connected with cultivation. All of them owned small patches of paddy fields. All of them had family members working on those fields. Those who lived a decent life with a regular income from non-agricultural sources worked only on their own land and did not work as hired labourers. The others had family members working as hired labourers. However, even if the 1969 land reforms was not very successful and even if the extent of land held by the *Pulayanmar* were lesser than that held by higher castes and communities, they were grateful

for the reforms that made them landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators like the other castes and communities.

The one reason that Communism helped thousands of Pulaya households to become owners of the land in which they lived was enough for many of them to offer their complete loyalty to the Left Democratic Front in Kerala. When the Communist movement took shape in Kuttanad in the first half of the 20th century *Pulayanmar* were genuinely attracted to it and the labouring class formed the core of the communist movement. It could be said that together with the efforts of protestant missionaries and the social reform movements, Communism also played its part in uplifting the *Pulayanmar* in Kuttanad. However, they had to face domination even with the Communist Party as pointed out by Devika (2013). Devika noted the underhand aspect of the Communists in Kerala. She wrote that from the time of the land reforms, that is from 1970s, all through the 1980s and even into much of the 1990s, caste oppression was largely overcome in Kerala through the twin strategies of social development and political mobilization. She noted two reasons given for this by the Communist leader and former Chief Minister of Kerala, E.M.S Namboodiripad. According to him, firstly, caste hierarchy had loosened considerably due to the operation of capitalist forces and reservations in education and government employment for the lower castes. Hence, occupational hierarchies had been dismantled considerably.

Secondly, the situation of the former untouchable groups was comparatively better in Kerala because the strong presence of the Left had weakened caste disabilities and created an organized working class with trade unions and associations in which people worked for common political goals beyond specific caste interests. E.M.S argued that the strength of the Left parties was a major reason for the decline of caste oppression. However, Devika noted that post-1990s political developments had pushed the question of caste back into the forefront of public debate. She called attention to the Dalit intellectuals who are opposing the claim made by E.M.S and pointed to the many dimensions through which caste has been ‘secularized’ by the Communists as an axis of social and economic power in Kerala. She noted more and more Dalit testimonies of the experience of caste oppression within Left organizations. Through her article, Devika showed that even though Communism is believed to remain for the labourers and the toiling commoners, in reality, even within the Communist Party/Government, the ‘powerful’ dominated the ‘powerless’.

However, in spite of dominance within the Party, as mentioned in Chapter 5, the support given by the Communist leaders gave the low caste/community agricultural labourers the courage to

stand up against the exploitation of the high caste/community landlords. Hence, since then, the *Pulayanmar* in my study area had been staunch supporters of Communism. I realized that even though the *Pulayanmar* in Keralam had an organization called the Pulaya Maha Sabha formed in 1938, which united all the *Pulayanmar* in Keralam for their rights, the *Pulayanmar* I met in Kuttanad did not have any strong organization and considered the Communist Party and its unions as their stronghold. During my interactions with the *Pulayanmar* who belonged to CPI and CPI (M) in Kavalam, Alappuzha, Moncompu, Nedumudi and Mampuzhakari, I understood that their involvement in politics gave them a sense of power and boldness, which no other efforts to uplift their caste could provide them. It provided a different tone to their relation with the higher castes and communities. However, it is different from caste organizations, as it does not work for the progress of the Pulaya caste.

Pulayanmar have come a long way when compared to their conditions in the 19th century (Remani 2016 and Pravin 2017). However, the fact that they still continue as hired labourers in the paddy fields of Kuttanad and that there are many among them who are still landless exposes their lack of social progress and their low position in the society. Hence, it could be said that it is only a minority among them who have progressed. The majority still remain in a tarnished state. Jeffrey (1976) wrote that if the *Namboodirimar* were too high that they distanced themselves from progresses, the *Pulayanmar* were so badly placed in the traditional society that there was little they could do to take advantage of the change. During my interactions with the *Pulayanmar* in the different villages of Kuttanad, I realized that the entire Kuttanad region embodies their slave experience. As Mohan (2015) states, for the *Pulayanmar*, the slave experience was deep and penetrating and historically connected to their memory. Their memories connected with the region are closely connected to their slavery in the region. Work in the paddy fields is staining them today because it is still deeply connected to their slave experience. It reminds them of their past. Their slave experience was part of a wider caste system experience. They were trying to get away from the fields making use of education and other developments around them but with little success. Hence, the old structures in the region reminded them of their slave experience. It created pain and discomfort in them. More than any other caste, I think it is the *Pulayanmar* who would like to have the old structures change for the new. But their condition continues even in the new structures.

Christians - Syrian Christians

Kuttanad comprises Christians belonging to different denominations. My focus lies on the Syrian Christians and the low caste converts to Christianity. Moreover, I am writing about the Syrian Christians as a group, regardless of their denominations. Similarly, there are converts

from different low castes to Christianity. It was difficult for me to distinguish between the various denominations, as they all appeared and functioned in a similar manner. Hence, I am writing about the low caste converts in general in my study area, irrespective of denominations. Syrian Christians are one of the most affluent communities in the region.⁶⁶ From what I understand from my own family history, four generations back, Syrian Christians living in Kuravilangadu in Kottayam District were summoned by the Travancore King to settle down in Kuttanad region. They were granted land by the king himself. Like my family and the twenty-seven other families who moved in together, there could have been many others also moving in, in similar manner. I have shown in Chapter 3 that largescale land reclamations started in Kuttanad in the early 19th century. Hence, it is plausible that during this period groups of Syrian Christians and others moved in to the region to undertake land reclamations and paddy cultivation. It was also during the same period that my paternal ancestors who were Syrian Christians moved to the highlands from Aruvithara in Kottayam District, leasing in land from the Poonjar Kings to grow plantation crops. The fact that both my paternal and maternal ancestors are basically from Kottayam District needs attention. Jeffrey (1976: 86) noted that Kottayam was the district in which Syrian Christians were traditionally most numerous and powerful. It could be understood therefore that this was a period when the Travancore economy was getting commercialized and the Syrian Christians obviously played an important part in the process as can be deduced from my own family history.

Being hardworking and enterprising, the Syrian Christians, together with the other inhabitants in Kuttanad at that time, played a major role in the ‘creation’ of Kuttanad into a major rice-producing tract through land reclamations as shown in Chapter 3. Apart from cultivating paddy on self-reclaimed land, the Syrian Christians along with the *Nayanmar* and a small section of *Ezhavanmar*, leased in paddy land belonging to the Travancore Government and Namboodiri landlords. The land reforms initiated by the Travancore Government from the second half of the 19th century, especially the Pattom Proclamation of 1865, made the tenants who were the

⁶⁶ The percentage of Christians in India according to the 2011 Census is 2.3% and their percentage in Keralam according to the 2011 Census is 18.38%. The figures shown as the percentage of Christians in India are inherently uncertain as it could be related to positive affirmation politics. Although a minority, the Christian population of Keralam is proportionally much larger than that of India as a whole. According to the 2011 Census, 29.55% of the population of Kuttanad are Christians and 62.25% are Hindus. Against the State average of 18.38 % Christians, the 29.55 % of Christians in Kuttanad make it an area of their dominance. The main denominations among the Christians in Keralam include Catholics (Syrian/Roman and Latin), Jacobite/ Orthodox Syrians, Mar Thoma Syrians, Church of South India (CSI), Pentecost/ Church of God members and Dalit Christians. According to 2011 Census of India, the 6.141 million Christians consists of 3.744 million Catholics (61.0% of the total Christians), 977,000 Jacobite/Orthodox Syrians (15.9%), 405,000 Mar Thoma Syrians (6.6%), 274,000 Church of South India (CSI) adherents (4.5%), 214, 000 Pentecost/ Church of God members (3.5%) and 160,000 Dalit Christians (2.6%). According to the 2011 Census, the most numerous among the Christian denominations in Keralam today are the Syrian Christians, numbering about 2,346,000. In Keralam, the Syrian Christians are considered as a Forward Community in the reservation list of the Government of India. There are 933,000 Latin Catholics making them the second most numerous Christian denomination. The Jacobite Syrian Christian community has a membership of 483,000 and the Orthodox Syrian community has a membership of 494,000.

Syrian Christians, *Nayanmar* and *Ezhavanmar* owners of the *Sirkar* (government) pattom land they cultivated. The Pattom Proclamation, the spread of cash economy and the change in the value of land in the 19th century benefited the Syrian Christians and *Ezhavanmar* more than the *Nayanmar* who followed the matrilineal marumakkathayam system of inheritance. The Syrian Christians who did not have any complex family institutions and were interested in trade and business could venture into new economic pursuits.

As the *Namboodirimar* and *Nayanmar* were drowning in their traditional social system, the Syrian Christians, Tamil *Brahmananmar* and *Ezhavanmar* started improving their economic position (Fuller 1976 and Jeffrey 1976). However, outpacing the *Namboodirimar*, the *Nayanmar* soon took to education and government jobs and in course of time, they together with the Tamil *Brahmananmar* dominated the government services (Jeffrey 1976). Syrian Christians also acquired education. In the late 19th century, the Syrian Christians had their own western-style educational institutions (Jeffrey 1976). They also took advantage of their relation to the British and the missionaries to obtain education and jobs both inside and outside India. Apart from landownership, the Syrian Christians moved into divergent commercial and economic enterprises like banking, joint stock companies, plantations, cash crops, public works department and so on, in addition to professions like engineering, medicine, teaching, etc. Although they did not have a leading role in the political system, they had a respected place in the total Hindu dominated society. However, even if they had a respected social position, it was from the mid-19th century with the commercialization of economy that Syrian Christians started acquiring real progress. Devika and Varghese (2010: 11) have stated that in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Syrian Christians emerged as Kerala's most 'advanced' community. The *Ezhavanmar* shadowed the Syrian Christians. Since then, the competition for social advancement in Kuttanad was more pronounced between the Syrian Christians, *Nayanmar* and *Ezhavanmar*. Even though the Tamil *Brahmananmar* were also part of it, they excelled in activities outside the region.

The social advancement of Syrian Christians continued in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. They were the main benefactors of the colonial and post-independent modernity. The Syrian Christians occupied a respected position in the society at the time of my fieldwork and several prominent families in the region retained the former esteem and pride. Their educational accomplishments enabled them to secure high positions in the changing labour market as pointed out by Thomas (2018) and Zachariah (2001). They stated that education is the basic factor, which enabled them to move ahead of many other castes and communities. Zachariah (2016: 16) stated that in Keralam, in general, it is the Christians who are better educated than

the Hindus. The Syrian Christians own many of the best private schools and colleges in Keralam. Pallikoodam, the school where I studied in Kottayam is a good example. Mary Roy, the women's rights activist and the mother of the famous Indian author Arundathi Roy is the founder of the school. Built by the British born Indian architect Laurie Baker, this school is famous for its unique campus and high standards in academic topics and extra-curricular activities. At that time, as the fee structure was much higher than other schools in Kottayam, it was only the wealthy families who were able to send their children to this school.

I studied in this school from 1991 to 2000. During this period, I had friends from the most wealthy Syrian Christian, Tamil Brahmin, Nayar and Ezhava families who formed the 'creamy layer' in Keralam. However, the majority of the students were Syrian Christians. Students from other communities were very few. It was a matter of pride and prestige among parents to send their children to this school. It exposed their wealth and status. As a school run by people who have a high profile in the society, we always had the opportunity to benefit the best. Even after schooling, due to the fame of the school and the way the students were taught and developed, the students from this school always had better opportunities, enabling them to excel in the different careers they chose. Among the four communities, it was often the Syrian Christians and Tamil *Brahmananmar* who excelled in studies, followed by *Nayanmar* and *Ezhavanmar*. The high fee structure in the school excluded the poor low castes and communities from getting such high quality education, which in turn opened wider opportunities for students from rich high castes and communities. This case gives a hint at the general condition prevailing in Keralam, where the rich and powerful are able to benefit from the best conditions. Also the fact that there were children from rich Ezhava families points at their attempts to invest in quality education for their children and their efforts to be part of the circle of the wealthy high castes and communities.

The second important factor that helped Syrian Christians in their socio-economic advancement is migration. Education made Syrian Christians qualified for high profile jobs with good pay scales abroad. The case was the same with regard to educated *Nayanmar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*. As the educational level of Ezhava, Pulaya and other converted Christian emigrants was low, they ended up in low profile jobs with low pay scales. Osella and Osella (2000) has mentioned about the case of the *Ezhavanmar*. Hence, remittances sent to Keralam is much higher in the case of well-educated castes and communities than in the case of less educated castes and communities. Migration among the Syrian Christians is not limited to the Gulf as in the case of most of the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and converted Christians. They have migrated to the USA, UK and Europe as doctors, engineers, chefs, in the IT sector, etc.

The Syrian Christians have benefited a lot from remittances in their socio-economic development.

Apart from emigrants, Syrian Christians can be found engaged in diverse streams of occupations in Keralam. There are professors, teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, businesspersons, traders, agriculturalists with plantations growing commercial crops and politicians in both UDF and LDF among them. If we look at the list of ministers from Keralam, we can see that they have always occupied high positions of power. In Kuttanad, they are engaged in paddy cultivation mainly as landlords, absentee landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators. The community includes both rich and poor. However, in Kuttanad they have not tumbled down in the traditional social hierarchy as much as the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*. Some of the poor among them work as cultivator-labourers in their own fields as a secondary occupation in addition to other occupations. But there are almost no one from this community working as hired agricultural labourers. There are also Syrian Christians flourishing in the coconut industry. There are several Syrian Christians engaged in the tourism business in Kuttanad and in other parts of Keralam. Many of my relatives have converted their traditional ancestral houses as homestays for tourists. Many have their own houseboats. I found them still as a hardworking and enterprising community engaged in various kinds of economic activities. Devika and Varghese (2010: 11) wrote that the Syrian Christians are a powerful presence in all fields of life in Keralam. Hence, being a forward community in the reservation list and the ensuing reduction of benefits from the government and other public institutions have not been hindering the progress of the Syrian Christians as pointed out by Zachariah (2001).

Together with the Syrian Christians' entrepreneurial characteristics, another aspect that needs emphasis is their relation to the caste system. As pointed out earlier, the Syrian Christians are a respected community in Kuttanad and are associated with the high castes. Even though they were considered equal in status to the *Nayanmar* in the past, it is believed by the Syrian Christians in my study area, including some belonging to my family that they belong to the few Brahmin families who were directly converted to Christianity by St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus Christ in AD 52. Fully aware that this is a highly debated claim, I do not intent to go into it because what is important for me is how these claims are used by the Syrian Christians to shape their position in the social hierarchy of Kuttanad. At the time of my fieldwork, myths and legends of apostolic and upper caste origins were employed by my Syrian Christian informants to substantiate their long tradition and to legitimize their higher status in society. Their emphasis on Brahmin origin seemed to be more crucial for them in a caste society like Keralam than on having an apostolic origin. Even though they were a flourishing entrepreneurial class, their

attempts in linking themselves to the 'fallen gods', the *Namboodirimar*, shows their profound desire to be associated with the high castes to claim high status and position in both the old and new social hierarchies.

At the time of my fieldwork, people from all castes and communities were striving for a higher status and position in the new class hierarchy. For the low castes and communities, it was a status, which they had to achieve. In such a context, by these claims, the Syrian Christians were trying to assert that their high status/position is not just achieved, as in the case of low castes and communities but ascribed by birth. Hence, they were trying to establish an equal footing on both the traditional hierarchy and the new class hierarchy. In fact, the present day Syrian Christians are descendant of converts from among Hindus. Even though they showed delight in their link to the Brahmin/Namboodiri caste, they never considered the Brahmins/*Namboodirimar* as superior to them. They were very proud of themselves and their long traditions.

Maintaining their own identity, the Syrian Christians adopted or retained many of the Hindu customs in their religious practices and rituals. Devika and Varghese (2010: 11) have stated that the Syrian Christians were closely integrated with the traditional Brahmin centred order of caste, but without losing their difference as *Nazranikal* or followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Rao (1994) wrote that though Christian in faith, they remained strictly attached to the Hindu way of life continuing to follow the social customs and ritual purity. This brings up the topic how the Syrian Christians are part of the caste system in Kuttanad/Keralam. Given the fact that they were associated with the high castes in the region, they practiced all the discriminations associated with the Hindu caste system towards the low castes and communities (Mohan 2015). Syrian Christian claims to Brahmin blood and conversion by the Apostle, qualified them for showing discriminations towards people from the low castes be it within the church or outside the church.

Together with the *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar* and *Nayanmar*, the Syrian Christians also kept slaves in the past and meted out all kinds of cruelties towards them as pointed out by Payyappilly (2012). Even though slavery was abolished in 1855, the high castes and communities including the Syrian Christians continued to keep them for many more years until around the early 20th century. Thomas (2018) wrote that the Syrian Christians supported the slave caste system to such a degree that the community worked against anti-caste, anti-slavery movements in the early 20th century. When the slaves took to education, in the latter half of the 19th and early half of the 20th centuries with the support of missionaries, it was strongly resisted

by these high castes and communities, as they considered it as a threat to their hegemony (Jeffrey 1976 and Mohan 2015). It was during the missionary phase (1850-1950) that large numbers of slave castes like the *Pulayanmar* got converted to Christianity much to the aversion of Syrian Christians (Mohan 2015). The suffering of the low caste converts from the hands of Syrian Christians is known in history.

This revulsion of the Syrian Christians towards low caste converts continues even today. I have observed this in my own family. They obviously look down at the converts as people belonging to low castes. In the early 1990s, both my paternal and maternal ancestral families often had low caste Christian converts working as servants in the houses. They preferred them to low caste Hindus in the kitchens and properties, which could be related to notions of purity and impurity. However, apart from this preference, they never considered them as equal. Even if the relation between the families and their converted Christian servants were cordial, it was never a relation based on equality. They were not allowed to show up in the main rooms of the houses, especially when there were guests, who were obviously from high castes/communities. Their movements were restricted to certain rooms in the houses, except when they were cleaning the house, which was mostly done when there were no guests. They mostly remained in the kitchen and backyard areas. They also had food in the kitchen, often only after everyone in the family had their food. Most of these servants were those who had generations of relationships with the family. Most of them lived in the land granted to them by the family or allotted to them as a result of the 1969 land reforms. In a way, it made them submissive to these families. But having servants like these gradually ceased from around the 2000s. The children of these servants got education and they were not at all interested in doing domestic work in their former landlord families as their parents and started engaging themselves in other occupations. Those who were available started demanding higher wages, which the landlord families were not ready to give. And gradually, such (attached) servants also ceased to exist. However, I have noticed that no matter what the low castes/communities and the converts achieved by way of education, better jobs or wealth, it never counted and they were looked down as people from the lower strata of society.

The Attitude of Different Castes and Communities towards Each Other

During my interactions with *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians, I realized that no matter where they were in the social hierarchy, they all considered and presented themselves superior. At the same time, they were all fully aware of their own social position in the hierarchy. In general, the *Namboodirimar*, the Tamil *Brahmananmar* and the Syrian Christians considered

themselves high in the traditional hierarchy and acknowledged one another's social positions, in spite of prejudices against each other. Despite competitions among themselves, through this mutual recognition, they in some way supported each other in defending their high social position in the backdrop of broader competitions from other lower castes and communities. Among the three in Kuttanad, the Syrian Christians were the most enterprising, followed by Tamil *Brahmananmar*. Even though most of the *Namboodirimar* stayed economically broke, they remained confident of their high social position in the traditional hierarchy as if fully aware that no one can snatch their fixed position. Even though, the young generation among them are drawn into competitions with other castes and communities, they seemed to be more relaxed than the other castes and communities I met. Even though the Tamil *Brahmananmar* were more active in the competitive spheres, they also had that relaxed attitude, as if they do not have to prove their superiority before anyone. This was not very much so in the case of Syrian Christians. Their claims of apostolic origin and Namboodiri blood theory sheds light at this fact. However, being a flourishing and socially respected community with a supposedly long tradition, they appeared proud, bold and confident in their behaviour and did not quiver in front of other high castes. No matter how much they have absorbed Hinduism and the caste system, as they technically belong to a different religion, they have a feeling that they do not come under the caste system; therefore, they do not have to bow down before anyone. This might have also influenced them in their self-assurance.

Even though *Nayanmar* are considered as a high caste in my study area and they had matrimonial alliances with *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* in the past, they looked down at the *Nayanmar* as a caste lower in the social hierarchy. However, they were not despised as much as *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and the other low castes and communities. I often got a feeling that the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* respected and acknowledged the Syrian Christians more than the *Nayanmar*. Maybe this is because, I being a Syrian Christian, and as they know my background, they gave me such an impression. Another reason could be, as the Syrian Christians are a community outside the Hindu religion, it might be easier for them to accept their position than an advancing caste within their own religion. The *Nayanmar* on the other hand seemed extremely proud of being regarded as a high caste in the society. Still, they were fully aware of their social position below the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*. This awareness, created some sort of a respect among them towards the other two high castes. Even if they showed great confidences and strength before castes/communities lower than them, in front of the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*, their self-assurance faded slightly. Anyhow, I observed tight competition for social advancement between *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. Even though all the other castes and communities

viewed them as equal in status, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians never regarded the other as superior to them.

The social advancement of the *Ezhavanmar* are seen more as a threat by the higher castes and communities. I felt that the real competition for social advancement in Kuttanad is between the *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians. Even if the Tamil *Brahmananmar* are also part of it, they are more dynamic outside the region. However, in spite of all the social, economic and political advancement of the *Ezhavanmar*, they have still not managed to get rid of the low caste tag and are still looked down upon by the other castes/communities higher in the social hierarchy. The *Ezhavanmar* are well aware of this and their social position. Hence, even if many of them have acquired wealth, they do not feel free in their interactions with the higher castes and communities and hence cling on to their own groups. Similarly, even though the condition of *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians have improved a lot in the last sixty years, they still remain at the bottom of the social ladder and are despised and looked down upon by the higher castes and communities, including the *Ezhavanmar*. After my marriage to my former husband, my relatives were so ashamed to tell others that he was a tribal man but they felt more acceptable to say that he was an Ezhavan and so instead, they said that he was an Ezhavan. This shows that the tolerable level down the social ladder for Syrian Christians was only to the Ezhava caste. This could be the same for the other high castes. However, this only means that the *Ezhavanmar* are just tolerable and not completely acceptable.

I noticed that more than the *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar* it is the other castes and communities who try to display their wealth and accomplishments before others. It is as if, even if the former do not display it, their superior positions are silently acknowledged by everyone. However, for the other castes and communities it is different. This tendency is more among *Ezhavanmar*, followed by converted Christians and *Pulayanmar* than among *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. However, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians also show off their wealth to seek acceptance and respect in society. All these castes and communities parade their wealth in the form of possessing land, money, gold, consumer goods and household appliances, households, etc. mostly by making use of the emerging consumer culture in Keralam. When the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and converted Christians are more flashy in their display of wealth, the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians do it in a more dignified way, projecting their old aristocratic remnants. For example, they keep and maintain their old big traditional houses to show their past glory. When the *Ezhavanmar* and other low caste/communities make it gaudy and glitzy with their dressing and decorations, the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians keep in simple and elegant.

Even though, detestation and aversion are not always shown outwardly, it is very much prevalent in the Kerala society. A good case is my own former marriage to a man belonging to a tribal community in Keralam, who was both at the bottom of the social ladder and economically backward. It was highly condemned by my Syrian Christian relatives. They saw it as such an immense shame and dishonour that they (except my parents and a very few relatives) shunned all their relations with me and him. We were never invited to any functions or anything related with my family and no one came to visit us. This revulsion was not limited to my family but extended to the people in my church and my neighbours who were Syrian Christians, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and converted Christians. All of them abruptly stopped talking to me and having any kind of friendly connections with me. I was suddenly looked upon as an outcaste or an odder. And they all shunned my former husband. It became mentally impossible for me to go to Kottayam after our marriage because of all the hatred around. So most of the time, I remained in Thiruvananthapuram where I stayed together with my former husband. The anonymity in the city was a great relief for me.

At the same time, my former husband's family and neighbours were very welcoming and warm. Even though I see it purely as their kind heart, my Syrian Christian background might have influenced their acknowledgement and acceptance of me into their family without any reluctance. But when it comes to people on my side, I experienced and observed the worst form of caste discrimination prevalent in our society during the period we lived together. My case was an extreme one. Even if my friends and relatives have also had love marriages, they either married people from higher castes/communities or from their own castes/communities. But my case brought out the real devil in my society. However, I have also noticed that these kind of revulsions are not limited between castes and communities. It was also possible to see people who are rich despising people who are not rich, which points at the class nature of the society. Hence, it is also possible to find people from the same caste/community despising others in the same caste/community also.

When this is the dominant trend, there are cordial relations also between the different castes and communities. It is not unusual to see people from different castes and communities as friends. However, how deep the friendships can be also varies. The son of my uncle who lives in Champakulam had a Nayar and an Ezhava as friends. They were always seen together and it was his Nayar friend, who migrated to the Gulf first among them, who helped him also to migrate. It could be the good friendship they had, that led the Nayar to help his Syrian Christian friend to get a job and migrate. The Nayar friend definitely knows that his Syrian Christian

friend's migration would improve his economic and social position. Still, he helped. In this case, no such competitions between castes and communities are outwardly visible. But it could be also interpreted that the help extended by the Nayar to the Syrian Christian made the position of the Nayar superior, making the Syrian Christian psychologically indebted to the Nayar. Hence, there are many such instances also of people from different castes and communities helping each other in the background of competitions between castes and communities.

During my college days in Keralam, I had classmates and friends who were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil/Konkani *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, converted Christians and Muslims. My background as a 'fallen' Syrian Christian enabled me to have friends from the top to the bottom of the society. My very close friends include a wealthy Konkani Brahmin, an above average Nayar and an average Muslim. Between us, we have never thought about our caste/community differences. But primarily, it could be the high caste/community background that brought us together in friendship. Even though, I had classmates from lower castes and communities with whom I had very cordial relations, which we still continue, they always shied away from being my close friends. Or was it me who shied away from them? My connections with the wealthy high castes/communities could have made them uncomfortable being with me. My Ezhava friends always clung to themselves and my Pulaya and converted Christian friends clung to their own separate groups. Sometimes, there were friendships across castes/communities between them. But close friendships between high castes/communities and low caste/communities were extremely rare. My personal case of my friendship, love and marriage with a man from the tribal community is one of the very few extreme and rare examples found in the Kerala society.

Conclusion

Chapter 7 thus shows how the old caste structure is deeply embedded in the society of Kuttanad. It exposes the competitions and prejudices between the different castes and communities and its continuation in contemporary society. It illustrates the socio-economic condition of the different castes and communities in the traditional social hierarchy. This paves the way for Chapter 8, which demonstrates the changes happening in the society towards the emergence of a society based on class and individualization.

Part II
Chapter 8
Caste, Class and Individualization

Chapter 8 is a continuation of Chapter 7. This chapter discusses the rise of class and individualization in a caste society, which is a consequence of the economic and political dynamisms in Keralam and India. The position of persons and their families in the class hierarchy is not based on religion, caste or community but presumably on economic and political power. It is possible to find people from different castes and communities on all the different strata of the class hierarchy even if there is a structural tendency of the high castes and communities to also occupy a higher position in the class hierarchy, and an opposite tendency for the low castes also to be placed in a low class position. The increasing material differences among people in Kuttanad show the reality of the economic class divisions. However, the people on the various layers of the class hierarchy do not necessarily identify as social groups. To some degree, they are only stratum of people who accumulate different levels of material wealth.

Rajan, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer from Chennankari said, ‘There are poor even among the high castes and communities and rich even among the low castes and communities. The rich, whether from the high or low castes/communities are able to access all the benefits available.’ He concluded that the ‘rich’ dominate and suppress the ‘poor’. The reality behind Rajan’s statement is demonstrated in this chapter. I found that caste, class and individualization exist side-by-side in Kuttanad making it impossible to label the society as any one of them. This ambiguity functions as an opportunity by the low castes and communities to rise in the social hierarchy. Although there are harsh material differences and economic class distinctions, there is also a considerable middle layer where the divisions are vague and ambiguous in the emerging class society. This creates a room for the social play of showing off in material consumption. At the same time, the challenge for the high castes and communities is to retain their high positions not only in the caste, but also in the class hierarchies. Eventually, it becomes a question whether the class hierarchy is a reproduction of the caste hierarchy.

I consider the tendency of individualization – where every individual is both responsible for and have to take the blame for their material destinies – as a social dimension, which is different from both caste and class. Both the emergence of class and individualization are undermining the old caste structures in different ways and have their impact on the traditional society in Kuttanad. Before I delve into the different ways people belonging to different castes and

communities are trying to cope with these social transformations, I shall present the background for the emergence of this new society based on class and individualization.

The Emergence of Class and Individualization

Three dynamics – secular education and occupations, migration remittances and new economic policies greatly influenced the rise of a new consumer culture in Keralam, which in turn led to the rise of individualization and a class society.

Secular Education and Occupations

The spread of social reform movements and Communism in Keralam in the 19th and 20th centuries had propagated the importance of secular education to the people. Education began to be seen as a means by several low castes and communities in Kuttanad to move out of the much stigmatized manual labour in the paddy fields. Secular education began to be given great importance by the different democratic governments that came to power since the formation of the State of Keralam. In 1969, Education Ministers from various countries met at Tehran to discuss eradication of illiteracy. In 1987, a new movement called ‘Appeal’ (Asia Pacific Programme of Education For All) was inaugurated in New Delhi to tackle illiteracy and to provide basic education to all. During this time, a total literacy movement was started in Keralam. In 1990, the then Prime Minister, V. P. Singh declared Ernakulam in Keralam as the first total literate district in India. In 1991, Keralam became the first total literate State in India (www.kerala.gov.in/total-literacy). Even if there are several criticisms made against the Kerala Model of Development related to education, Keralam is much ahead in educational development than many other States in India. Above all, it shows the importance given to education in the State and its part in bringing social and economic transformations in Kuttanad. Even though there are differences in the level of education acquired by the different castes and communities as shown by Dilip (2010), all the different castes and communities in Kuttanad tried to make use of the new opportunities brought by education in their own way.

Along with secular education, the social, economic and political changes in Keralam and India since the mid-20th century also paved the way for alterations in the traditional occupational structure in my study area. The changed circumstances made it possible for people from both low and high castes and communities to take up jobs with higher and regular income in the field of medicine, engineering, teaching, IT and government service. Even though in practise, it was often the high castes and communities like the *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians who had better opportunities and openings, as hierarchies in the new jobs are outside the traditional caste/community hierarchy, it became possible for

people from low castes and communities like the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians also to be part of it. This enabled those who succeeded among them (who formed only a minority) to become wealthy. Whether they succeeded in getting respect in society is a different issue. Some of them even started occupying positions higher than the high castes and communities thereby bringing changes in the traditional structure in Kuttanad as shown in Chapter 7. At this time, signs of an emerging class society started appearing. Moreover, these changes exposed before the low castes and communities, the possibilities to rise up in the new class hierarchy that was getting formulated and it created aspirations and hopes in them.

Migration Remittances

Migration was a major event that happened parallel to the changes brought by secular education. The oil boom in the Gulf in the 1970s had a great impact on the traditional society in Kuttanad. Enormous numbers of people from Keralam, from all castes and communities migrated to the Gulf for employment in the oil sector. Simultaneously, the mass migration of nurses, especially female nurses from Keralam to different parts of the world, particularly since the 1970s also had a great impact in Kuttanad. Due to the social stigma attached to the nursing profession in Keralam, nurses came mainly from low castes and communities as shown by Abraham (2004). At the time of my fieldwork, there were nurses also from poor high castes and communities as well. Apart from the changes brought in the labour market in Kuttanad as shown in Chapter 6, one of the significant ways migration affected the society in Kuttanad and Keralam and led to the rise of the class society and individualization is through remittances.

The huge remittances sent by those working in the Gulf and the nurses working around the world to their families back home in Keralam drastically boosted the money at the disposal of the migrant households. This continued in the 1980s, 1990s and even at the time of my fieldwork. Tables 13 and 14 shows increase in the amount of remittances to Keralam (1991-2018) and Kuttanad (2003-11). A major impact was the economic stability it provided to the migrant households, which enabled them to raise their position in the emerging class hierarchy. Osella and Osella (2008:159) have asserted that the overwhelming underlying project of all migrant families is social mobility. Another impact was that after stabilizing their basic economic needs like food, shelter, clothing, education of children, health related expenses, dowry for daughters and relatives, etc. people started spending the excess money on luxury goods and services that became available in the markets of Keralam. This further helped in raising their position in the class hierarchy and boosted the local economy. Zachariah and Rajan

(2004) affirmed that gulf money had played a major role in restructuring the Kerala society, at a rate never before experienced in the State.

Apart from the basic needs, most of my informants invested their money in gold and real estate, buying land mostly outside Kuttanad. They invested in constructing commercial buildings for business or for renting out both inside and outside Kuttanad. This was also an important reason for increased land reclamation activities in Kuttanad and the sprouting of the real-estate business after the 1990s. Investment in land by the emigrants and returned emigrants was taken as an opportunity by many of the youngsters in Kuttanad to employ themselves in the real-estate business and make money. They gave up their traditional occupations and encouraged other inhabitants to fill up paddy fields and waterbodies, promising that they would find people to buy their land. Many of the emigrants and returned emigrants invested in tourism business in the region by starting homestays, resorts, hotels, restaurants, etc. for tourists. A few started taxi services and agricultural processing establishments. But there were non-migrants also investing in all these areas. Apart from this, I did not find many investments of emigrants in the region. It was a paradox that the emigrants were investing mostly outside Kuttanad, in the major towns and cities of Keralam, and not in the region.

Moreover, investments in the region whatsoever by inhabitants were made more with the motive of personal and familial upliftment in the social hierarchy rather than for the overall development of the region. This could be a reason why they preferred investing outside the region as chances of success are more outside. Two of my returned migrant informants in Kavalam who were converted Christians deposited their savings as fixed deposits in commercial banks. Seven returned migrants from Champakulam, Mithrakari and Kavalam who were converted Christians, *Nayanmar* and *Ezhavanmar* considered it safer to find employment in some private sectors mostly outside Kuttanad. Three from Mampuzhakari and Moncompu who were *Ezhavanmar* employed themselves as taxi drivers in the region itself. Nine returned emigrants from Karumadi, Kumarakom, Thakazhi and Ramankari who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians were even trying to go back abroad. It was my agricultural community informants in the various villages who helped me to contact these returned emigrants. Hence, only a very small percentage of the remittances/money of the migrants became productive investments in Kuttanad. At the same time, as it increased land reclamation activities, it was in fact adversely affecting the region.

Education and migration did help many in Kuttanad to raise the economic and social position in the class society. However, not all those who got educated managed to raise their position.

Many educated remained unemployed. Their positions remained low. Only those who could acquire an appealing job were able to climb up the social and economic ladder. At the same time, unlike after the 1980s and 1990s, not all migrants were well-educated in the 1970s. Some were educated, and most were technically skilled. However, the pay rate abroad being higher than in Kerala or India, those who migrated, educated or not, were able to earn more than the educated employed back home as shown in Chapter 6. Hence, more than the educated employed locally, it was the migrants who were able to earn more and rise up fast in the new class hierarchy.

Similarly, migrations and remittances were not bringing economic equality but inequality in Kuttanad. There were migrant households with one or two members working abroad in almost all the villages and towns I visited. Still, they formed only a minority in the total population of the region. Therefore, those families that benefited from migration formed only a small section among the inhabitants. Zachariah and Rajan (2004 and 2012) suggest similar analyses. Zachariah and Rajan (2012: 6) in their 2011 study showed that although the total remittances to the State of Kerala was relatively very large, only a small fraction (17.1%) of the households in Kerala received them; more than 80% of the Kerala households did not receive any remittances in 2011. However, even if emigrants form only a minority in Kerala, remittances have played a very important part in the economic development of the State.

Zachariah et.al (1999: 4) specified that migration had been the single most dynamic factor in the otherwise dreary development scenario of Kerala in the last quarter of the twentieth century. They asserted that migration had contributed more to poverty alleviation in Kerala than any other factors like agrarian reforms, trade union activities and social welfare legislations. Later, Zachariah et.al (2001: 3-4) wrote that the Government of Kerala had been looking up to the emigrants and return emigrants for help in the State's development programmes. Zachariah et.al (2002), Kannan and Hari (2002) and Zachariah and Rajan (2007) have all referred to the magnitude of foreign remittances into Kerala. Tables 13 and 14 shows increase in the amount of remittances to Kerala (1991-2018) and Kuttanad (2003-11). According to Zachariah and Rajan (2004), foreign remittances to the Kerala State had been seven times of what the State received from the Government of India as budget support, fifteen times the receipt from cashew export and nineteen times the receipt from marine export. The foreign remittances had formed 1.8 times the annual budget of the State.

I came to learn that even if it is a small minority that received the remittances from the emigrants abroad, remittances resulted in a steady growth of bank deposits creating a large pool of

loanable funds for investment purposes in the State. Hence, both the LDF and the UDF government support the migration of inhabitants from Kuttanad. Zachariah et.al (1999 and 2001) have observed this government affinity to support migrants in their study about migrations in Keralam. However, the reluctance of the migrants to invest for developments in Kuttanad created challenges for the government. Kannan (2002) stated that one of the formidable challenges Keralam was facing was its inability to convert the savings in the economy, available in the form of loanable funds, into productive investment. It was in fact to overcome this challenge and to attract investments that infrastructural developments were given importance in Kuttanad. And it was in the middle of this context of government making efforts to make use of the remittances and to attract investments that the paddy cultivators were striving to cultivate paddy.

When we look at the minority migrant households in Kuttanad, it cannot be said that all of them are rich. The economic position of migrant households varied depending on their social and educational background. Migration of highly qualified rich high castes/communities like *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians made them even richer. I observed wealthy, modest and poor Namboodiri, Tamil Brahmin, Nayar, Ezhava, Pulaya, Syrian Christian and converted Christian migrant households. But there were several non-migrant households that were richer than the migrant households. Some of the former Syrian Christian and Nayar landlord households and also some of the non-migrant new rich Ezhava and converted Christian households were wealthier than some of the migrant households. Even though Zachariah et.al (2000: 4) showed that as a result of migration, the proportion of population below the poverty line had declined by 12%, unequal distribution of wealth was very much visible in my study area. Nevertheless, it can be said that there was a radical transformation in the social, economic and political landscapes of Kuttanad and Keralam that gained momentum in the 1980s and became more palpable from the 1990s, as a result of education and migration. It had its roots in the 1960s and 1970s. This transformation resulted in the rise of individualization and a society based on class.

The New Economic Policies and the Rise of Consumer Culture

The third and most important factor that triggered the rise of a society based on class and individualization is the unbolting of the new economic policies by the government in the 1990s related with neo-liberalism. It opened the markets for national and international consumer goods and services, and domestic and foreign investments. This made both domestic and foreign private corporate sector active in Keralam. It unleashed a consumer culture that brought

rapid change in the society in Kuttanad. This points at the role played by consumption in the shaping of culture as stated by Douglas and Isherwood (2002).

One of the most important outcomes of the new economic policies was the sprouting of hypermarkets, shopping malls, supermarkets, hotels and resorts run by national and international corporate traders everywhere in Kerala, especially in the urban and suburban areas, displacing the small traditional shops and markets.⁶⁷ Together with this and the elimination of import restrictions, the variety of different appliances increased rapidly in the market, leading to a substantial drop in the prices of commodities. Loan institutions working together with the retailers of these goods offered the option of paying for the purchases in instalments with very low interest rates for the customers. This is a clear example of what Appadurai (1988b) noted that demand is the economic expression of the political logic of consumption and demand can be manipulated by direct political appeals. Thus, the inflow of remittances, the improved standard of living made possible by secular education and the new economic policies contributed in creating a consumer culture and society in Kerala, which now had the money to consume. Kannan and Hari (2002) and Zachariah and Rajan (2004)

⁶⁷ The following were the major domestic corporate traders operating in Kerala at the time of my fieldwork. Oberon Mall is one of the popular shopping malls located at Cochin, Kerala. Opened in 2009, this is the second largest mall in the State. This mall stocks many popular brands and has an impressive food court and a multiplex. Nucleus Mall is also one of the famous shopping malls in Kerala, located in Maradu, a suburb of Cochin. It was opened in 2010. The Mall is India's first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified gold rated green mall. This six-floor mall has many famous international and Indian brands for clothing, footwear, belts, bags, watches, home decor, iZone, Baby and Kids Stores etc. It also hosts India's first 24 seat 6D theatre. Apart from this it also has a gaming zone. The food court also has many top food chains like Pizza Xpress, China Town, and Baskin Robbins.

The Lulu International Shopping Mall located at Cochin, Kerala is the biggest shopping mall in India, spanning 6.87 hectares, with a total retail floor area of 1.7 million square feet. Opened in 2013, this mall has everything from big brand stores to multiplex (including 5D), food courts, restaurants and family entertainment zones. It also has an ice-skating rink, which is 5000 sq. ft. and a twelve-lane bowling alley.

Naaz Lifestyle Mall is another large mall located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. It has nine floors which house brands like Lee, Wrangler, Levis, Lee Cooper, Pepe Jeans, Van Heusen etc. along with many other cosmetic, bag and shoe brands. It also has a food court and a gaming zone.

Bay Pride Mall is one of the most popular shopping malls in Kerala, spreading over 200,000 square feet area. This shopping mall is situated facing the Arabian Sea, and this is considered as one of the great plus points as people can get the sea view. Mall features top brand shops like Metro, Brandz, Bata for bags and footwear, Levi's, Welspum, Fila, Price, Music World for music system, Nike, Koutons, Reynolds, Spykar Jeans, John Players for men's wear, Archies gallery, Fabindia, Nokia, Spiker Jeans, Adidas etc. The food court has various cuisines and has popular outlets like Potpourri, China Town, Marrybrown, and Barista etc. There is also a gaming centre.

Big Bazaar is an Indian retail store that operates as a chain of hypermarkets, discount department stores, and grocery stores. The retail chain was founded by Kishore Biyani under his parent organization Future Group, which is known for having a significant prominence in Indian retail and fashion sectors. Founded in 2001, Big Bazaar is one of the oldest and largest hypermarket chain of India, housing about 250 plus stores in over 120 cities and towns across the country including in Kottayam, Cochin, Thiruvananthapuram, etc. in Kerala.

Reliance Fresh is the convenience store format, which forms part of the retail business of Reliance Industries of India, which is headed by Damodar Mall. The company already has 1691 Reliance Fresh outlets across the country, including Kerala.

Aditya Birla Retail Limited (ABRL) is the retail arm of Aditya Birla Group company. ABRL is the fourth largest supermarket chain in the country after Future Group, Reliance Retail and D-Mart. It operates two different store formats - Supermarket and Hypermarket under the brand 'More'. It has about 494 supermarkets and 19 hypermarkets around India including Kerala.

Spencer's Retail is a chain of retail stores headquartered in Kolkata, West Bengal having presence in over 35 cities in India including Kerala. Spencer's began operations as a retail chain in the early 1990s in South India. They have stores in the form of convenience stores and hypermarkets.

These shopping malls and supermarkets have all kinds of Indian and international brands for customers. A number of international food chains also swelled up in Kerala like the KFC, Domino's, Pizza Hut, McDonald's etc.

supports that the increase in income due to remittances increased the consumption of the households in Keralam. Kannan and Hari (2002: 23) showed that the average per capita consumer expenditure in Keralam was below the national average till 1977-78. Kerala's modified per capita income caught up with that of the national average only in 1984-85. Since then per capita consumer expenditure in Keralam exceeded that of India progressively reaching 41% above the national average in 1999-00. This new consumer culture resulted in a serious restructuring of the society.

I realized that it was a matter of pride and excitement for most of my informants in the different villages of Kuttanad to go and buy things from the new supermarkets and shopping malls that have recently appeared in the neighbouring towns. Even though there were a number of supermarkets popping up in the villages of Kuttanad, they were not as big and flamboyant for my informants as the ones in the towns. Hence, they all preferred going to the towns. Their usual choice of towns for shopping were Kottayam, Changanassery, Thiruvalla and lastly Alappuzha, all of which are neighbouring towns of Kuttanad. During my research, I observed that the rich *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians did not show much excitement about going to the towns and buying stuff.⁶⁸ They showed as if they do it often and it is not something new to them. In the early 2000s, it was very common among my relatives in Kuttanad to go to Ernakulam, which they consider as more advanced in fashion and style, to buy clothes. This is something, which an Ezhava, Pulaya or a low caste convert did not do at that time. Even at the time of my fieldwork, this was almost the same but there were some newly rich *Ezhavanmar* and low caste converts who had started imitating the high castes and communities.

Similarly, in the towns also, there are special shops, which are visited mainly by the rich high castes/communities. The FabIndia in Kottayam is an example. It is an Indian chain store retailing garments, furnishings, fabrics and ethnic products handmade by craftspeople across rural India. The style of products sold in this shop is unique, which cannot be found in the other shops in town. Most of the items are simple and natural and suits the tastes of high castes and communities, who abstain from buying gaudy, glittering stuff, which is associated with low castes and communities. The price of products in this shop are also high. But more than the price, it is something with the style of materials sold in this shop that attracts the rich high castes and communities. It is also a matter of pride among the high castes/communities to buy things from FabIndia. Brand names are important for them in situating their place among the other high castes and communities. Even though the low castes and communities are aware of brand names, they are not so insistent about it and are content even with a duplicate.

⁶⁸ I did not get any opportunity to hang out with rich *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*.

At the same time, there are big textile shops like Seemati, Parthas and Narmada where people from all castes and communities go. All these three shops are owned by rich Tamil Brahmin families and have low to extremely high priced products and is thereby able to satisfy people from all socio-economic backgrounds. The children of the owners of all these shops were my schoolmates in Pallikoodam. It sheds light on how flourishing they are in the Kerala society and also at the importance given by Tamil Brahmins to education. They are rich and they sent their children to the best school in town. The fact that they sent their children to a school run by a Syrian Christian points that they do not care much about caste/community while giving education to their children, as in the past. At the same time, it also points at their efforts to move together with the other high castes and communities in the area to establish their position in the society.

I observed that unlike the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians, the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converts expressed their excitement in going for shopping to towns. I found it amusing when I heard that these new shopping malls like for example the Lulu mall in Ernakulam were a great tourist attraction and there were schools taking students to these corporate malls as part of their annual excursions. At the same time, a few of my informants who were *Ezhavanmar* and *Pulayanmar* in Kavalam, Mithrakari, Puthukari and Mampuzhakari were shy or had an inferiority complex to go to malls and supermarkets for shopping. They felt that it was something beyond their social and economic position. Sindhu, is an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Puthukari from a below average family. She was transplanting paddy in her husband's fields in the village when I saw her. Her husband was a private bus driver. She worked as a hired agricultural labourer in the paddy fields. He husband's income was not enough to get her out of manual labour. She once told me that her husband was trying for opportunities to go to the Gulf. As I met her at a time when I was researching about consumer culture, I asked her if she has visited the shopping malls in the neighbouring towns. She said, 'Those are places where the rich people go for shopping.' However, there were several informants from these castes, especially the Ezhava caste, who often visited the supermarkets and shopping malls in the neighbouring towns. Sindhu's inhibition exposes the embarrassment and disinclination of the poor and the low castes/communities to present themselves before the rich and the high castes/communities. Apart from exposing the divide between the high castes/communities and the low caste/communities, it also sheds light at the emerging divide between the rich and the poor in a class society.

While on the one hand, there was excitement about the new culture that was developing, on the other hand, people faced the hitches that were triggered by this culture. I met Meena, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Kavalam in her house while she was preparing lunch for the family. I was walking through the small lane in front of her house, in between her house and the canal to observe the region. It was then I met her. The fact that she still worked as hired agricultural labourer indicates the poor financial condition of her family. Her husband worked in a toddy shop in the village owned by a rich Ezhava family. She had a son and a daughter. They studied in the local government school. We talked about several topics regarding life in the region. When we talked about her children, she told me that she and her husband were finding it difficult to deal with their seventeen-year-old son who wanted them to buy all kinds of high-priced modern gadgets because his friends had them. Twenty-five other women who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converts in the villages of Karumadi, Mithrakari, Ramankari, Champakulam and Thakazhi also raised such a concern about their children to me.

Many of the youngsters below the age of twenty from these villages told me that it is an embarrassment if they do not have the modern technological devices. Jithu, is an engineering student from Ramankari. He was the son of an Ezhava pump operator in the village. I met him when I visited their house. He told me that he had friends who were rich *Ezhavanmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. It was usual for them to go to the KFC, which was opened recently in Kottayam on their Royal Enfield bikes. But it was financially difficult for him to go to the KFC so often. He told me that if he does not accompany them, they would look down at him. Similarly, he also told me about his embarrassment of not having an expensive smart phone and a bike. He said that he could not afford to follow the fashion, which was in trend among his friends. He expressed the psychological difficulties he has because of this situation. The stories of many other youngsters I met were also similar. Even though Jithu's father was a pump operator, he managed to send his son, who was good in studies to pursue engineering, with the hope that he would get a good job and earn money to lift up the entire family's condition in the social and economic fronts. He was a hope for his parents. Jithu on the other hand was struggling with his position as a poor and low caste person and as a person having to mingle with others from rich and high caste/community backgrounds. From what I understood, his rich friends did not know the strain he was experiencing. In a way, it exposes the pressure generated by consumer culture in a caste-class society upon a poor and low caste/community person.

I realized that many of them who were poor were striving to create an image of themselves as rich in order to be able to stay on an equal level with those who were wealthy, particularly in the class hierarchy. The eventual motive is to raise their position in the class hierarchy. This does not mean that this is the experience of all the youngsters in the region. This is only some among the few I met. But it shows that such a tendency is prevalent in the region. Something that needs special mention here is that this was not observed among any one particular caste or community, but among almost all the castes and communities including *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converts. As I did not get an opportunity to observe the youngsters who were *Namboodirimar* and the Tamil *Brahmananmar* I am not including them here but as this was observed among all the other castes and communities in the region, I assume that it is the same with them also.

Participant observation exposed more of the consumeristic mannerisms in my study area. Being a native, I have noticed that during the different local festive seasons like Onam, Vishu, Deepawali, Christmas, New Year etc., the newspapers are filled with not news, but attractive advertisements of eye-catching discount sales and new offers with numerous gifts and gift coupons for goods like refrigerators, air conditioners, microwave ovens, blenders, two-wheelers, four-wheelers etc. from different companies. These commercial advertisements have become more noticeable and vigorous in the last ten to fifteen years. I am including my ethnography on the consumer culture among some of my informants in Kuttanad.

It was Onam celebration in Keralam and almost all my informants, especially the women were excited about the discount sales that were part of the festival. During my life in Keralam, I myself used to wait for these festivals to buy things for sale with my friends and relatives. Many of the gadgets we have at home were bought for these kind of festival sales. Some Nayar, Ezhava, Pulaya and Syrian Christian women I met in Kavalam, Nedumudi, Chembumpuram and Champakulam had told me long before the festival that they were waiting to buy many things for the Onam sale. I met most of them in the paddy fields, some of them I met when they were engaged in some work related with the *thozhilurappu* and some of them in their houses when I visited them. With the purpose of observing them and to know their thoughts, I visited a paddy field in Champakulam where a group of women agricultural labourers were working. I deliberately brought the topic of Onam in our discussion and also mentioned about the discount sales to hear what they had to say. Radhika, an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Champakulam, asked Mithra, another Ezhava agricultural labourer from Champakulam, 'What are you planning to buy for Onam sale this time?' Mithra replied, 'We had bought a blender from the Butterfly Company last year, but it is not so good. So this time we are going to try

some other company. How about you Radhika?’ Radhika said, ‘We had not been able to give a good gift for my brother’s wedding. So we are planning to gift them a washing machine.’

Radhika and Mithra work as hired agricultural labourers and they also go for work in connection with *thozhilurappu*. The income they get from these work may not enable them to buy these consumer goods. But I realized that Radhika’s husband is an electrician in a known construction company in Alappuzha and Mithra’s husband owns three taxis. Even though they are not extremely wealthy, they are an average family and the income their husbands earn makes it possible for them, who seriously desire to be part of the consumer culture, to afford these household appliances. At the same time, it must also be noticed that even though they are an average family, they still do manual labour in the paddy fields and that too as hired labourers. Hence, even though, the majority of the *Ezhavanmar* were trying to get away from manual labour in the paddy fields, the cases of my Ezhava women agricultural labourers show that there are differences too to this general trend. It could be the additional income they get that makes them work in the fields and maybe it is the company and friendship that develops in the workspace among the women that make them go for work in the paddy fields, rather than sitting at home, bored. I have met a few Ezhava and low caste convert women in different villages, engaged in the *thozhilurappu* work, who gave me similar reasons as to why they went for *thozhilurappu* work. Hence, I assume it is the same with Mithra and Radhika with regard to their work in the paddy fields.

Ragini, a Pulaya by caste who was there in the paddy field said, ‘Seeing the wide variety of cake recipes on YouTube, my children are forcing me to make cakes for them. For this sale, we are planning to buy a microwave oven.’ Meera, a Latin Catholic, said her family was buying a laptop for her children as they had started their high school level. Like Radhika and Mithra, Ragini and Meera also may not be able to afford the consumer goods with their meagre income but I found that Ragini’s husband is a driver in Saudi Arabia and Meera’s husband is working in a construction company in Kuwait. So their households are those that benefits from foreign remittances. Here too it can be noticed that even if Ragini’s and Meera’s households are wealthier than many other Pulaya and low caste converted households, they still continue to work as manual labourers in the paddy fields. The reasons could be the same as in the case of Mithra and Radhika. The four of them told me that everything is now available in the markets and that it was making life easier for them. They recounted their younger days, twenty or twenty-five years back, when they had to wash clothes of all their family members and how their back used to ache. Now they have washing machines. They narrated how difficult it was to powder food grains twenty years back, using the traditional devices (*urallu* and *attu kallu*)

and how easy household chores have become now with the coming of blenders and food processors. Their accounts revealed the possession of material goods like refrigerators, washing machines, blenders, microwave ovens and other technological equipment in the households of Kuttanad today and the fact these consumer durables are within the reach of all castes and communities who had the money to buy them. It exposes the spread of capitalist driven consumer culture, drawing people into its fold, and the gradual emergence of a society based on class and individualization.

I did not visit the houses of these informants but being a native of this region, I know several *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste Christian converts in Champakulam, Ramankari, Mampuzhakari, Thakazhi, Kumarakom, etc. who have these household appliances at home. In addition to paddy cultivation, some of the members of these families are engaged in non-agricultural activities in the neighbouring towns or have remittances from abroad. That could be the reason why they are able to afford these goods. Kannan and Hari (2002) stated that the per capita consumer expenditure in Kerala was one of the highest among Indian states since the mid-1980s. Zachariah and Rajan (2004: 44) showed that in 2004, 60% of the households in Kerala possessed television sets, 45% had telephone connections and 30% had refrigerators. All the corresponding proportions had been much smaller in 1999. Between 1999 and 2004, the proportion of Kerala households with television sets increased from 38% to 60%. The corresponding change in the case of telephones was from 15% to 45%, and in the case of refrigerators from 19% to 30%. These studies support what I observed in my study area.

As my days progressed in the field, some of my informants provided me the reasons why they thought consumerism was increasing in the region. Mithun is a Syrian Christian bookstall owner in Changanassery. I met him when I went to buy some books from his bookstall. We talked about my research and as it was a time when I was studying about consumerism, I asked more questions related with it to him. He said, 'With increase in the educational level and the emergence of new occupations, now both husband and wife work and earn money. This increases the household income of families.' According to him, this change in the working conditions have also modified the consumption pattern in the households. I have experienced this myself and have noticed the same among my friends and relatives during my life in Kerala. Take the case of one my Nayar friends and her husband in Kottayam. Both of them were working in banks and they seldom had time to cook food in the weekdays. This resulted in them accumulating all kinds of devices and household appliances that made domestic work easier and comfortable even though it increased their cost of living. It also promoted dependence on restaurant food. This was the same with many other friends and relatives of

mine and also with me and my former husband. When we were living in Thiruvananthapuram, tired after the day's work, most of the days, we had food in restaurants together with other married friends who were equally tired like us and then go home for the night. Twelve other Nayar, Ezhava and Syrian Christian informants in Kavalam, Champakulam, Kottayam and Alappuzha also shared similar experiences.

I noticed that even though the new electronic and technological devices helped in making life easier, it was increasingly being bought by many to be equal with others in the society. Material goods are progressively being used as a display of wealth and to show-off before others. I observed such consumer behaviour among some of my Nayar, Ezhava, Pulaya, Syrian Christian and low caste Christian converted informants. When *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians did it in a gentle way, the *Ezhavanmar* and others did it in an exaggerated manner. This is because the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians already have a rather secure high position in the traditional caste hierarchy, which spontaneously paves way for them to a high position in the emerging class hierarchy. Hence, they can be more relaxed than the castes/communities lower to them in the traditional caste hierarchy. Whereas for the *Ezhavanmar* and the other low castes and communities, this was a good opportunity to rise up in the newly emerging class society. I realized that the low castes/communities increasingly valorized private consumption and market-based goods in the changing social, economic and political conditions. They utilized these goods and market-based consumption to challenge the might of the old elite.

Success

During my interactions with the various castes and communities in the region, I noticed that the concept of 'success' is becoming more material oriented in my study area. Success implied high education, fetching a job either inside or outside India but definitely outside Kuttanad, owning big houses with all appliances and vehicles, ownership of vast stretches of property, possession of money and gold and a luxurious life enabling one to enjoy all the comforts in the world. I found that unable to secure this 'success' by themselves, some of the elder generation I met from all castes and communities were placing high hopes on their children who were expected to make money and raise the position of the family in the new class hierarchy. Mathaikunju is a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator I met in Chembumpuram. Even though he belonged to one of the old aristocratic families in the region, he lost all his wealth in the various businesses he started in the region. Now he owned only a few hectares of paddy fields and had immense debt. He had a son and a daughter. Being a family friend, I visited his house during fieldwork to talk with him. He told me that he is giving good education to his children with the hope that they would get a fetching job and save the family from debts and raise the lost family status. I

also had a talk with his children and they told me that their parents were placing high hopes on them that it was extremely stressful for them.

In this case of Mathaikunju and family, they already belong to a high community but they have fallen down economically, much like my own family. Even if they have fallen down economically, they still get a respect in the society. This respect they get even after their fall is only because the traditional caste society still prevails. However, this respect they get without wealth will not help much to place them in a high position in the class hierarchy unless they become wealthy again. However, this is not so in the case of fallen *Namboodiramar*. Even if they have lost wealth, somehow they still get veneration more than a fallen Syrian Christian or a fallen Nayar. But it is different for a wealthy Syrian Christian family. In that case, they are no doubt. Their position is high both in the caste/community and class hierarchy. Therefore, in the case of a fallen Syrian Christian family, they cannot remain as relaxed as a Namboodiri or Tamil Brahmin family but have to strive to rise up and they do that because of the fear of getting glued to a low position in the emerging new class hierarchy. This is the reason why Mathaikunju placed his hope on his children. But it can be seen that like the pressure created by the consumer culture, which I have shown in the case of the Ezhava engineering student Jithu, the rise of the class society is creating immense pressure on fallen high castes and communities also.

Similarly, I met Karunakaran, a Nayar landlord-cultivator in Kavalam. He had a son who was doing his Masters in History in a college in Changanassery. I understood that the son was trying hard to clear government service exams but was not succeeding and hence he was remaining unemployed. This made Karunakaran extremely anxious. Karunakaran said, 'He is the only hope we have. If he does not clear the exam and get a job, our condition will remain the same without any progress.' Karunakaran and his son's case is very similar to Mathaikunju and his children's case. In both cases, we can see parents from financially broken high caste/community families placing high hope on their children to rise up in the class hierarchy. Both of them know that their position in the traditional caste/community hierarchy is high. But they are aware that that alone will not help if they have no money and material wealth in the emerging class hierarchy. So they strive for material advancement to rise up in the class hierarchy.

People often compared the 'successes' and 'failures' of different families and persons. I met several other parents in the different villages of Kuttanad from various castes and communities who placed such great hopes on their children. The children who were the youngsters in the region were often struggling with their own concerns related with the growing consumer culture like in the case of Jithu I already mentioned. In addition to that, the high hopes their parents

placed on them often created psychological problems among youngsters, especially among those who were 'unsuccessful'. This does not mean that they were going insane but it created stress, anxiety, embarrassment and inferiority complexes among them. The unemployed youngsters I met in the different villages belonged to this 'unsuccessful' category. They told me that they were looked upon as failures in life by the people around them. It clearly exposes the strain and the tension created by the emerging consumer culture and class society in Kuttanad. I do not mean to say that this is the condition of all the youngsters or unemployed youth in the region. I just want to expose these cases in order to show the variants in the region.

From my research about the consumer culture that was rising in Keralam, I comprehended that it was creating divisions among the inhabitants in Kuttanad, leading to new forms of inequalities at the time of my fieldwork. It drew a line between what my informants called the 'rich' and the 'poor', the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped', the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized', the 'modern' and the 'not modern', the 'global' and the 'non-global'. Kochuraman, the Ezhava ferryman in Champakulam and I were waiting for passengers one morning. He was telling me about his family and he said, 'There has always been disparity between the rich and the poor. The disparity is increasing even more now making the poor, poorer and the rich, richer.' The consumer culture plays an important part in exposing this disparity. Consumerism is used as a means especially by the new rich low castes/communities to expose their wealth before others in order to acquire a high position in the new class hierarchy. When the new rich low caste/communities are doing this, the rich high castes/communities do it even more to show their power and to assert their position in the new class hierarchy. Devasi, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Pulinkunnu said, 'When you have a good house and a car, people will think that you are rich and you get recognition and respect.'⁶⁹ I have experienced this myself.

The recognition people gave to my family when we were economically broke and after we started acquiring wealth, which is after my arrival in Norway, is different. People 'think' we have money now. Those who never paid any attention to us before, started talking to us with respect, those who never invited us for functions, as we were not up to their living standard, started inviting us. This applies to both my Syrian Christian family and to others in the neighbourhood and society. Hence, what Devasi said is true in my case. So there are many who make use of the consumer culture to display their wealth and power to seek respect and to place themselves in a high position in the new class hierarchy. The people who suffered from this changing social characteristics and consumption patterns in Kuttanad were the 'poor' who did not have the means to be part of the consumer culture.

⁶⁹ Devasi is a male landlord-cultivator.

This raises the question who is the poor. Isn't it comparison that creates poverty? It brings attention to Siva (1988), Nandy (2002) and Broch-Due (2000). Siva (1988: 8-9) argued that culturally perceived poverty need not be real material poverty. She wrote that the ideology of development declares those who do not participate overwhelmingly in the market economy, and do not consume commodities produced for and distributed through the market, poor, even though, they might be satisfying those needs through self-provisioning mechanisms. She asserted that people are perceived as poor if they live in housing made from locally available natural materials like mud and burnt brick rather than in cement houses. They are seen as poor and uncivilized if they wear traditional clothes rather than western clothes. They are seen as poor if they do not have all the modern gadgets in their houses. On the contrary, in the local contexts, houses built with local materials are far superior, being better adapted to the local climate and ecology, and traditional clothes are also well suited to the climate in India. This new western cultural perception of poverty, Siva argued, destroyed wholesome and sustainable lifestyles and created real material poverty by the denial of survival needs themselves, through the diversion of resources to resource intensive commodity production. Thus, Siva argued that capitalist model of progress saw sales and profits as indicators of well-being and destroyed the real well-being of people.

Nandy (2002) also made a similar assertion that those regarded as poor, may not always be so. He stated that poverty has always been there but destitution has become more pronounced only recently given the assault on traditional communities and their life support system. This is also reminiscent of the assertion made by Broch-Due (2000:31) that far from being a straightforward condition of deprivation and destitution that is easily defined empirically, poverty is in fact a contentious and complex construct that encapsulates a vast range of social and historical struggles and constantly evolving cultural values.

An amalgam of Caste, Class and Individualization

It has been comprehended and observed that secular education, migration remittances, new economic policies and the resultant consumer culture led to the emergence of a class society in Kuttanad/Keralam. However, I noticed that the contest for rising up in the new class hierarchy is now more between persons, no matter to which caste or community he/she belonged than between castes and communities. Hence, the caste-class society has a third dimension to it in Kuttanad/Keralam and that is individualization. If a person got a fetching job, his/her primary drive is to uplift his/her own position and his/her own family's position in the class hierarchy. The majority of them never really think of uplifting the caste or community they belonged.

However, when the condition of persons and their families improved, it indirectly enhanced the condition of the different castes and communities to which they belonged. This happens automatically as long as the traditional caste/community system prevails. For example, several Syrian Christians from my church in Kottayam are working abroad in the different parts of the world. With the money they earned abroad, many of them have bought land in different parts of Kottayam as investment to add to their family wealth. They do this to raise their own and their family's position in the class hierarchy. But the church and the government sees it as properties belonging to Syrian Christians.

Something that needs to be emphasized here is that the competition to rise up is seen not just between persons belonging to different castes and communities but is also seen between persons within castes and communities and even within families, which is a clear indication of the rise of individualization in the society of Kuttanad. It is important to note that in spite of all differences and competitions between persons and different castes and communities, unlike in other parts of India, communal violence is not visible in Kuttanad or in Keralam. The other person is not seen as an enemy but only as a competitor and there is a big difference between enemies and competitors. Devika and Varghese's (2010) study also affirms this fact. They stated that in the early and mid-20th century Malayalee society, 'communalism' refers not to fierce hatred and violence between communities, but to intense competition around rights and resources within the field of modern politics and is centred upon the State. As Frøystad (2012) asserted, religion need not necessarily be divisive in societies marked by religious plurality. In her study of the Hindu ritual and the incorporation of religious others, she showed that in India, religious boundaries still display signs of malleability despite the religious politicization and occasional interreligious violence of the past decades. I shall now illustrate the emerging tendency of individualization currently observed in the caste society of Kuttanad through my ethnography of the contests between persons within castes and communities and between persons from different castes and communities to substantiate my point.

Contest between Persons within Castes and Communities

Latin Catholic Example

I am noting what I observed in a neighbourhood at Chennankari. What I observed there is the same I observed in almost all the different villages I visited in Kuttanad. Mathai, was a Latin Catholic cultivator-labourer from Chennankari. He had a son and a daughter. His daughter had been married away to a nearby town but his son was remaining unemployed even though he had completed graduation in engineering. His family had a huge amount as debt due to loss in paddy cultivation and also because of the dowry they had to pay for their daughter. Because of

financial difficulties, they were unable to be part of the consumer culture. Mathai's neighbour, Jacob, was also a Latin Catholic cultivator-labourer. His son was working in an international company in Technopark in Thiruvananthapuram.⁷⁰ Jacob's family had all the material goods locally associated with a 'successful' family, like for example, a big double storied house built in modern architectural style, a car, a motorbike and all kinds of domestic appliances. It was their son's 'success' that enabled them to become rich. They were searching for a marriage alliance for their son. They were very particular to tell the would-be bride's family that once married, their son will be settling in Thiruvananthapuram and not in Kuttanad. Jacob's wife Susamma told me that only then would they obtain good alliances.

Jacob's family and the others in the neighbourhood considered Mathai and his family as a failure. Two others from the area, an Ezhava and a Nayar told me that they gave too much dowry for their daughter, without knowing their limits, to show-off before others and that was the reason why they were in debt. From what I understood, it was to make sure that their daughter was secure and happy in her husband's house that they gave a good dowry. But because their economic position was low, it was seen as a showoff by others who themselves were part of the parading of material wealth. Jacob sympathized with Mathai's plight but from my interactions with him, I realized that he was more pleased to be able to use his social and economic power to dominate Mathai on various occasions. Lack of wealth silenced Mathai.

Mathai's wife, Lissy, told me that if or when they become wealthy, once her son gets a 'good' job like Jacob's son, she wanted to show Jacob and his family that it is not only they who are 'successful' but also others can become 'successful'. Mathai's and Jacob's case clearly exposes the contest between persons belonging to the same community and their attitudes towards each other. Even though both are from the same community, only one family was able to make use of the new opportunities before them. Lissy's statement reveals their hope to rise up from their present state to a higher position in the class hierarchy. This is something they could not do in a caste society, where positions are determined by birth but which is possible in a class society where positions are flexible and achievable. It exposes the pressure placed on a poor low community family by the rising consumer culture and class society. It also shows the burden placed by parents on the children to rise up in the class hierarchy.

⁷⁰ Technopark is a technology park established in 1990 by the Government of Kerala under the Communist Chief Minister E. K. Nayanar. It is the largest Information Technology Park in Asia in terms of developed area. The park is dedicated to IT ventures. Launched in 1990, Technopark as of 2015 has 10 million square feet of built-up area, and is home to over 350 companies, employing nearly 60,000 professionals. The units in Technopark include domestic firms, joint ventures and subsidiaries of foreign companies engaged in a wide variety of activities, which include embedded software development, smart card technology, Enterprise Resource Planning, process control software design, engineering and computer-aided design software development, IT Enabled Services, process re-engineering, animation and e-business. Technopark is owned and administered by the Government of Kerala.

Ezhava Example

In the neighbourhood of Mathai and Jacob, Kumaran, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer and his son Vijayan were engaged in all kinds of economic activities like toddy business, taxi, coconut cultivation, etc. and were flourishing. The father and son worked together but it was the son who was more active with everything. They had recently bought a brand new Maruti Swift car at the time of my fieldwork. I heard Kumaran telling Vijayan to keep the registration number unwritten on the number plate of the car until the last day the Motor Vehicles Department permitted. He wanted to move around with the 'For Registration' number plate board showing that the car is brand new. In this context, I remember an opposite experience I had with an old Syrian Christian landlord family in Mampuzhakari. They had bought a new Ford car but the owner did not want to take the car out with the 'for registration' plate, until he had the number plate entered. In his case, he did not want to show others that it was a new car but he wanted others to feel that he had that car from before and that he and his family is used to having cars from before. This is a clear example of the difference in attitudes of the old and the new rich. Most of the Ezhava households in my study area were similar to that of Kumaran's. They were engaged in several economic pursuits that they were able to make money, which enabled them to become part of the new consumer society and raise their position in the class hierarchy. Kumaran's family is a clear example of a low caste family making great efforts to acquire material wealth, and utilizing the emerging consumer culture to display their development in order to reposition themselves in the class hierarchy.

Similarly, Raghavan, an Ezhava cultivator in Champakulam had a son who was doing business in Changanassery and a daughter who was a teacher in a school in Changanassery. Being a financially sound family, they had a satisfactory position in the class hierarchy compared to many other *Ezhavanmar* I met. During my interactions with them, I realized that they had stiff competition among their own relatives to show who was more successful and who had more wealth. When his relative Rajan, who was living in another part of Kuttanad, visited his house while I was there, Raghavan was boasting about the new property he had bought in Kottayam. He told Rajan that what is wise now is to buy properties outside the region. He said that only people who have money could afford it. His relative, at the same time, said that he married his daughter giving a huge amount as dowry to a bank manager in Thiruvalla. He was expressing that his daughter was very fortunate to get a hardworking bank manager as her husband. I could see that Raghavan could not really digest it. I could sense the envy present in their conversation. At the same time, both of them talked about how successful they were when compared to many *Nayanmar* in the locality. They were gossiping about some of their Nayar neighbours whose

economic conditions were not good. In their talks, they considered themselves much superior than the *Nayanmar* in the class society. Indirectly, they were even letting me, a Syrian Christian know about their achievements. Raghavan's case illustrates both the competition within families and castes as well as between people belonging to different castes. Both of them, especially Raghavan's family can be seen making good use of the opportunities brought by the recent developments to place themselves high in the class society. In this case also it can be noticed that the social mobility depends to a great extent on the children in the families.

Syrian Christian Example

Almost all the Syrian Christian households I visited, even though there were inequalities within the community, were prosperous in general and were proud of their achievements. I have my maternal family in Kuttanad and my paternal family in the highlands to compare. In general, both families are wealthy and occupy high positions in both the traditional caste/community hierarchy and in the class hierarchy but there are a few families within the main family like ours who have fallen down in the economic ladder. Maybe because in Kuttanad the Syrian Christians have to interact and cooperate with different castes and communities to produce paddy and are used to mingling with the poor, that they were more kind to me and my family when we lost our wealth. At the same time, in the hills, maybe because the Syrian Christians interact only or mainly with the Scheduled Tribes, who are considered by them as the most inferior beings and hence consider themselves as far superior beings that as we lost our wealth, me and my family experienced the worst incidents of discrimination from them. My marriage to a tribal man made matters worse but I was condemned more by my paternal family than my maternal family. However, the wealthy in both families looked down at us and at others who had economically fallen down within the family. Even if they had wealth, very few came forward to help us to climb up the ladder. It felt as if they wanted us to remain in misery forever. It points at the competitive mentality among Syrian Christian families. When me and my family started acquiring wealth again, which was due to my migration as a student to Norway, some started acknowledging us but others appeared jealous of our progress. I have come across similar cases of competitions and discriminations within and between Syrian Christian families during my life in Keralam.

Another thing I have noticed is that the efforts to make progress are very much individualized among Syrian Christians. The competitions within families and between families testify it. My case is also a good example. I do not think about uplifting the entire Syrian Christian community in Keralam when I am struggling to earn income. If and when I make income, I only think about me and my family. It is the same with many others I know. Even if my relatives or Syrian

Christian friends make money and become wealthy, it is they themselves and their families who benefit not the rest of the Syrian Christians. However, as I mentioned earlier, the progress made at personal and familial level has its impact on the community as a whole and in turn again benefits the family and the person within the community when it comes to political matters. During my visits to the different Syrian Christian families in the region, I noticed that they were making full use of the new developments and opportunities to compete with another and at the same time, retain their high position in both the caste/community and class hierarchies.

Pulaya Example

There was a Pulaya household in Chennankari, where the son Anish and daughter Suja were government employees. Suja was married to a person from the same caste in the locality itself, who was also a government employee. As I have mentioned in Chapter 7, government service is a refuge for many of the *Pulayanmar* to move out of manual labour in the paddy fields and to raise their position in the new class hierarchy. They were searching for a bride for Anish. Their parents and ancestors had been agricultural labourers. Their economic condition had improved considerably after their children got employed. Here too it is the children in the families who are uplifting their social position in the class hierarchy. Several other Pulaya households had enhanced their conditions in a similar manner as a result of education, migration and employment in the government sector. However, it must be kept in mind that compared to many other high castes and communities, the level of education attained by the *Pulayanmar* was very low, the benefits from migration was also low and in the government service they occupied low positions. Still, compared to their own level some sixty years back, they have come up a long way. At the same time, there were also Pulaya households that were still in a sorry plight. Anish's family members were very proud of their achievements and considered themselves 'successful' in life. They had built a new house in modern architectural style and had a car and a bike. The mother was very particular that Suja put all her gold ornaments all the time. She said that otherwise people would say that they pawned them. What is visible here is a struggle of a low caste family between their caste position and class position. Even if they are aware of their low situation, the new class development is seen as a hope and an opportunity to move out of their caste position.

I realized that there was competition within the various Pulaya households to display who had more wealth and who was more successful in life. Some of the households I visited were jealous of the rise of others in their own caste in the class society. For example, there was contest between Maniyan's family and Kuttappan's family. Both of them were *Pulayanmar*. Both of them had educated their children and they were doing well in their lives. Their children were

engaged in different jobs. Three were in government services. One was a politician, another was a nurse working abroad, others were teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges. Kuttappan always wanted to give me the impression that his family was richer than Maniyan's. Maniyan also did the same. Their children were also part of this contest. I met almost all the children from both households and they were equally proud of their achievements and their hard-earned wealth. The *Pulayanmar* were more expressive and open about the contest between them than the high castes and communities. I noticed that even if they competed with one another to acquire and display material wealth and to position themselves higher in the class hierarchy, they were very supportive and thoughtful towards each other. There was affection and consideration among them. If a real need arises, they were there for each other. I have observed this during my life with my former husband and his friends from different low castes. This is something I did not observe among the other castes and communities. The competitions were more fierce and ruthless among the higher castes and communities. It could be the common miserable past and its memories that creates such a bond among them.

Contest between Persons from Different Castes and Communities

Along with contests between persons within same castes and communities, there are also competitions between persons belonging to different castes and communities. However, when persons compete, they see each other as individual competitors rather than as persons representing another caste/community. I am including below my ethnography where I witnessed such contests and detestations between persons from different castes/communities.

Once during my fieldwork, there was a quarrel between two neighbours at Mampuzhakari. One of them, Thomas, belonged to the Syrian Christian community and the other, Divakaran, was a new rich Ezhavan. Both of them had big, spacious houses, cars, two-wheelers and everything that exposed their wealth. The reason for the dispute was trivial. Divakaran had his dog's kennel attached at the wall between his house and Thomas's house. According to Thomas, there was extremely bad smell coming to his house from the kennel. There were frequent quarrels between them verbally. I followed what they said to each other and noticed that among many abuses, both of them talked about each other's social position. Thomas called Divakaran *puthu panakkaran*, which means 'new rich' whereas Divakaran said that he also had wealth like Thomas and hence was not lower in status than him. He called Thomas 'a dirty old *janmi*'. The accumulation of material wealth and the frequent quarrel between the two reflected the fierce competition between the two. Both of them were making full use of the new consumer culture to display their wealth not just before each other but also before the rest of the society. One thing that needs attention in this case is that it is not only the contest between two persons

belonging to different castes/communities that is visible but also the contest between two persons itself. If we look at the contests between persons from different castes/communities and same castes/communities, we will not be able to find much difference between the competitions. What we see is only the competition between persons and their families irrespective of caste and community. At the same time, caste/community and discriminatory feelings are also very much present.

On one occasion, I joined Sarasamma and her family on their trip to Seematti, a textile shop in Kottayam from Champakulam. It was their daughter's marriage and they were going to buy wedding clothes for the bride. This Pulaya family had become reasonably rich with the remittances sent by Sarasamma's husband who was working in the Gulf as a driver. While they were looking at the different clothes, Sarasamma took out one golden coloured *laccha*, a form of Indian dress worn by women and told all her sisters present in the group that it looked the same as the one worn by the daughter of a Syrian Christian family near to her house, on her wedding. Even though the price was above her budget, she insisted on buying it for her daughter. This sheds light on what Osella and Osella (1999) wrote that the past exclusion of large parts of the population from many significant areas of consumption might have led to an over-determination of present practice, which could be seen at work in several areas. They mentioned how the lower castes and communities who were denied the usage of gold and jewellery in the past, enthusiastically purchased and wore them now and how they chose to wear upper caste jewellery designs. In this case, the Pulaya woman is trying to imitate a high community in fashion. By doing this, she is trying to get close to the level of the Syrian Christians in one way or the other. Even though the Syrian Christian mentioned in this example remains uninformed of this incident, this case portrays the social race and competition from the Pulaya side. However, even though the Pulayanmar are part of the struggle for social advancement, they are fully aware of their position in the hierarchy. The emergence of the class society is looked with hope by them to improve their social position. Similarly, I observed competitions between persons belonging to other castes and communities also in my study area.

New Hierarchy – A Reproduction of the Old Hierarchy

As persons from different castes and communities can be seen scattered in various positions from the top to the bottom of the class hierarchy and as people in the different layers do not consider themselves as a social group, the society found in contemporary Kuttanad is an amalgam of caste, class and individualization. This brings to the fore, the questions as to how does caste and class interact in contemporary Kuttanad society and to which degree is caste translatable into class society. Even if the position in the class hierarchy is determined by the

possession of economic and political power, I understood that caste plays an important role in creating the position of a person in the class hierarchy. For example, birth in high caste/community and possession of money helped those people born in high castes and communities to situate themselves in high positions in the class hierarchy. Rich *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians occupied high positions in both the caste and class hierarchy. But what do they give importance to - caste or class? To which do they feel they belong?

When it comes to *Namboodirimar* and Tamil *Brahmananmar*, their high position in the caste hierarchy is undisputed. But when it comes to *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians, as their positions are contested in the traditional hierarchy and also because they acquired wealth and power at a later and more recent period, they have to verify and show their superiority. The Syrian Christian claims of Namboodiri blood and apostolic origin are examples of their insecurity related to their position. A poor Namboodiri still gets some veneration due to his/her high position in the caste hierarchy. Even though a poor Tamil Brahmin also finds some reverence due to his/her high position in the caste hierarchy, it is far less when compared to *Namboodirimar*. The reason could be that they are from outside Keralam. Similarly, a poor Nayar and a poor Syrian Christian also find some reverence due to their high positions in the traditional caste hierarchy. This respect they get is only due to the prevalence of the traditional hierarchy. However, this veneration need not translate into high positions in the class hierarchy for poor Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. They have to compete with all the others to secure economic and political power in the class hierarchy.

When it comes to *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians, the majority of the *Ezhavanmar* are far above the other low castes/communities in the class hierarchy. Even if their low caste tag still follows them, the rich among them have become dominant enough to compete with the *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians in the social, economic and political sectors and in positioning themselves high in the class hierarchy. But even if their condition has improved significantly, they still feel inferior to the higher castes and communities. Hence, the uncertainty of their position continues. In spite of all their achievements, they are still looked down upon by the high castes and communities. They also do not get the recognition they expect from the low castes and communities as well. The poor *Ezhavanmar* are still located in low positions in both hierarchies. In Kuttanad, they are the ones who are still engaged in manual labour in the paddy fields and toddy tapping and related activities. Even if many among the *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians have managed to improve their conditions and there are reasonably well off among them, most of them still occupy low positions both in the

caste and class hierarchy. They still experience discriminations in new forms. Hence, caste has a great influence on the position and condition of a person. In many ways, class becomes a reproduction of the caste society.

Still, the emergence of the class society is looked upon with hope and is seen as an opportunity by the low castes and communities to loosen themselves from the grip of the age-old caste system and raise their status in the society. Hence, a major section of the inhabitants from all castes and communities I met were striving to make money, in order to raise their status in the new hierarchy. However, even if the various economic and political conditions helped many from low castes and communities to acquire material wealth and improve their condition in the class society, it has not helped any caste or community to change or raise their position in the traditional caste/community hierarchy, where their positions are already fixed. Even if positions in the caste hierarchy are fixed, the emergence of the class society remains as a challenge for the high castes and communities, thereby drawing them also into the struggle for social recognition. Those who were under immense pressure due to the rising consumer culture and class were the poor high castes/communities and the poor low castes/communities. In all these complexities, the competitions are observed in the form of contests between persons belonging to different castes and communities rather than as contest between caste and community organizations as I have mentioned earlier. Hence, what is observed in contemporary Kuttanad society is a complex relation between caste, class and individualization.

Part III

Chapter 9

Development Perspectives in Kuttanad – Perspectives of the People

Part III is about ‘development’ and portrays the importance given to ‘development’ in Kuttanad. By tracing the development perspectives in Kuttanad, this Part illustrates how development is looked upon as a means to exploit the natural resources in the region by both the people and the government, to bring changes in the social stratifications and to enhance capital. It exposes the conflicting development outlooks prevailing in the region and the contest over natural resources. The Part is divided into Chapter 9, which delves into the perspectives of the inhabitants and Chapter 10, which looks into the perspectives of the government.

By demonstrating the development perspectives of the people in Kuttanad, Chapter 9 gives a clear indication of how people regard development as a means to make use of the natural resources in the region to bring changes in the social hierarchy. I have tried to categorize the inhabitants according to their attitudes to the region and their perceptions of development. The population being highly heterogeneous with inhabitants belonging to different religions, castes, communities, political parties, social organizations, occupations, interests, attitudes, ambitions, outlooks, etc. it was extremely difficult for me to categorise them into groups. Nevertheless, I managed to put them into three different groups in order to explain the complexities connected with development. However, these three groups must not be considered as impermeable boxes.

The population in Kuttanad could be broadly categorized into non-agricultural community and agricultural community. Those inhabitants engaged in occupations other than agriculture and have no connection to agricultural activities are termed as the non-agricultural community. They are presented as group 1 in this chapter. Even though some of them live in Kuttanad, most of them have migrated to places outside the region. The bureaucrats and politicians who have no affiliations to agriculture also belong to this group. The agricultural community includes paddy cultivators, fishermen, coconut cultivators and those engaged in animal husbandry. However, this does not mean that they can be grouped tightly in this manner because there are paddy cultivators, who are also engaged in fishing or coconut cultivation, or fishermen engaged in coconut cultivation, or those engaged in all at the same time to some degree, etc. All of them together form the majority of the population in Kuttanad. Among them, those engaged mainly in paddy cultivation form the largest group. My informants from the agricultural community are mainly paddy cultivators. The paddy cultivators include landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers. It was hard to compartmentalize the

paddy cultivators also because among them, there are people who are fully engaged in paddy cultivation and those who are partly engaged in it. And among them there are people with different perspectives and attachments to paddy cultivation. I have tried to present this divergence in the three different groups presented in this chapter. Even though, those fully and partly engaged in agriculture, who are presented as group 2, form part of the agricultural community, when I use the term ‘agricultural community’, I mean only those who are fully engaged in and dedicated to paddy cultivation/agriculture who are presented as group 3.

In the initial days of my fieldwork, I realized that ‘development’ is an important word for all the inhabitants I met. Hence, I decided to pursue its pretext. I learned that the challenging physical features of the region made life demanding and tough in the past, and this had a great influence on the inhabitants’ perspectives of ‘development’. In the second half of the 20th century, ‘development’ was a positive word of hope for the inhabitants who hailed it enthusiastically. However, the social, economic, political and cultural developments over the years changed the inhabitants’ attachments to the region and ‘development’ began to be perceived and anticipated differently by the inhabitants and the government. Hence, the different sections of people I met, who wanted to occupy the same space in Kuttanad, had conflicting interests over the resources there. However, in spite of all differences, there were no violent conflicts or communal issues. One of the main consequences of this disparity was that it adversely affected the environment. The Malayalam word for development is *vikasanam*. *Vikasanam* literally means expansion, evolution and development. Even though, when using the word *vikasanam* my informants normally meant ‘development’, it could be inferred that the word also indicated the evolution of the region through development. Now I will present the different sections of inhabitants I met during my fieldwork.

Group 1

It is difficult to find inhabitants who are not directly or indirectly connected with cultivation in Kuttanad. Even though people are seen engaged in occupations other than paddy cultivation, almost all of them own paddy lands, which they have leased out, or have relatives working on it, or they themselves work on it for subsidiary income. However, now and then it is possible to meet people who are least interested in paddy cultivation also. Most of them live outside Kuttanad, while some of them live in the region itself, pursuing occupations other than paddy cultivation. Apart from the fact that they own land in the region, they have no connections with paddy cultivation. They are fully engaged in other economic activities for livelihood. Most of them look at their land as useless and have left it fallow. Equated with the agricultural community, this group forms only a minority of the population. My informants include

professionals, government employees, businesspersons, Non-Resident Indians and their families. Those engaged in tourism industry are also part of this group. However, it should not be mistaken that all those engaged in these occupations are against paddy cultivation. I am including in this group only the perspectives of those who are against paddy cultivation. I am first presenting the perspectives of some people I met before I analyse their accounts.

Raphy is a Syrian Christian engineer from Champakulam living in Changanassery. He was a relative of one of my informants who belonged to the agricultural community in Kavalam. I met him during one of my efforts to meet people who had migrated from Kuttanad to the neighbouring towns. Raphy looked upon Kuttanad as a region with high scope for 'development'. He was disappointed about the development initiatives of the government, undertaken so far. According to him, 'Except for a few roads here and there, there are no developments in Kuttanad'. He was against the conservation of paddy fields and wetland laws and said that the people must be allowed to make use of their land to create an environment where developments can happen. 'If people who have the ability to develop the region are put in chains, what can they do?' In his opinion, it was only because of the lack of proper atmosphere for developments that no one was ready to invest. In his view, if national and international investments are allowed, one would observe quick transformation of the region into a highly 'developed' one. He pointed out that all the big cities of the world were once rural agricultural regions. 'Did the governments and the people of those regions insist on retaining them as such?' he asked. He was of the opinion that it is when people are open and flexible to change and transformation that 'developments' happen.

According to Raphy, the unemployment and migration of the educated youngsters itself is proof that no 'development' is happening. He told me that it was this realization that made him take up engineering and then migrate from the region to Changanassery, where he got employed in a construction company. He was trying for opportunities to go abroad and make money. In his view, in today's world, the smartest one is the one who knows how to make money, by making use of the opportunities around. According to him, such opportunities are not only unavailable but also not allowed to be created because of the adamant stand of the paddy cultivators to utilize the land only for paddy cultivation. He was impatient with the slow pace of development in the region. From Raphy's statements, I realized that recognition of 'development' depends on how one defines 'development'. Raphy's expectations of 'development' are very high that he is unable to recognize anything in the region as 'development'. Moreover, he wants developments that help him to make money and is not bothered about the environmental consequences. Why does he want to make money? It is obvious that it is not just to meet his

basic needs. It could be stated that it is his longing to raise his social position that is reflected in his statements.

Padmanabhan, a Nayar landlord from Kannadi, whose son was doing real-estate business and Tomychan, a real-estate businessman from Champakulam who lives in Kottayam said that at times, the government takes measures for 'positive' developments. I met them in different occasions but they had similar views. In their view, the development initiatives in association with multinational companies were such positive measures taken by the government. However, due to the opposition of the agricultural community, nothing materialized. In their opinion, infrastructural developments like hospitals, schools, colleges, airports, resorts, flats, multiplexes and IT parks will open the door to 'development', provide employment to the educated youngsters, solve the problem of unemployment, prevent people from migrating and improve the economic conditions of the people. Only then, will the region move in the direction of 'development'. And for that to happen, both of them said that paddy fields have to be filled up. According to Tomychan, the agricultural community does not know that there is a world beyond these paddy fields, and that is the reason why they fear 'development' and oppose it by holding on to their fields. The statements of Padmanabhan and Tomychan are clear indications of the contest over resources in the region and exposes the lack of concern for the environmental consequences of development. Their link to the real-estate industry makes both of them directly and indirectly related with the new land reclamations in the region. Hence, it is not surprising that they support and encourage the filling up of the landscape. In effect, it is their livelihood. Subliminally, land reclamations help them to make money, which in turn help them to rise up in the social hierarchy.

While we were talking about the value of the wetlands and the unique resources in Kuttanad and its disappearance, some of my informants I have included in this group were of the opinion that even the agricultural community is exploiting the resources. One of them was Kuruvila, a Syrian Christian real-estate businessman from Chennankari. It was one of my real-estate informants in Kottayam that helped me to contact Kuruvilla. I met him in his traditional house in Chennankari. He told me that none of the inhabitants wants to destroy Kuttanad. For people other than the agricultural community, the resources in the region are of no use, unless used for purposes other than agriculture. He pointed out that profit is the motive behind everyone's actions and activities, even with that of the agricultural community. When we were talking, Isukuttan a Syrian Christian landlord in Chennankari came to visit Kuruvilla and he also joined in the discussion. According to Isukuttan, the agricultural community is standing for the conservation of the region only because their livelihood depends on paddy cultivation.

Likewise, others' livelihood depends on other occupations, which might require the filling up of paddy fields and waterbodies. Even though Isukuttan was engaged in paddy cultivation, he remained as an absentee landlord in the region by leasing out his fields. His children were settled in the USA and he was the only one now engaged in agriculture. The statements of Kuruvila and Isukuttan gives a good hint of the intention of both the agricultural and non-agricultural community, which is to make profit, that is, money. I am not stating that there is anything wrong in making profit or money. What is noticed in the context of Kuttanad is that one of the main intentions of people to acquire money is to raise their positions in the class society.

In the opinion of Babychan, a Syrian Christian resort owner in Ramankari, development happens very slowly because the government is trying to satisfy both the agricultural and non-agricultural community at the same time. I met him during my visit to his resort in Ramankari. The analysis of my empirical data makes me consider what Babychan said regarding the act of the government to be true. A good example is the government's double stand regarding the new land reclamations as shown in Chapter 3. It was during my enquiry into the sale of land in Kuttanad that I met Santhosh, a Pulaya real-estate agent from Mampuzhakari. His parents and brothers are engaged in agriculture. He was of the opinion that because of the land conservation laws, even those who are not interested in paddy cultivation are forced to cultivate paddy. I have met several people during my fieldwork who were not much interested in paddy cultivation but were engaged in it because they could not fill up their paddy fields. Hence, there are elements of truth in Santhosh's statement. He said, 'Because of the law, people cannot even sell the land. After all, who wants to buy paddy fields and do cultivation here?' What he said is a reality because as mentioned in Chapter 3, I met many people who were finding it difficult to sell their properties, and those who were buying land in Kuttanad were not buying it for cultivating paddy but for other commercial reasons.

It was during one of my investigations into who owned the barren and uncultivated fields in the region that I happened to meet Issac, a Syrian Christian doctor from Pulinkunnu living in Changanassery. He told me that he got his piece of land in Kuttanad as his family share. He left it barren because he had some quarrels with the labourers and their unions over various issues. He told me that he did not have the time to quarrel and do paddy cultivation. As most of his relatives were all educated and working and living outside the region, and as there was no one to help him with cultivation, he did not think of cultivating it at all. In his opinion, paddy cultivation will stop within a couple of decades. He said, 'Who wants to work in the fields under the hot sun and the heavy rains.' He told me that his two children would soon be doctors. In his opinion, development means the development of people, and that is possible only if the region

where they live is 'developed' in a manner that can help them to 'develop'. That, according to him, was not happening in Kuttanad.

I realized that Issac had a job that helped him to position high in the new class hierarchy. Therefore, he was not interested in paddy cultivation and there was no need for him to indulge in the issues related with cultivation and the region. Even if he was not very eager about what happened in Kuttanad, because his socio-economic condition was secure, he supported the transformation of the region into a landscape that helped people to 'develop'. By 'development', he means the progression of people in the economic scale. My fieldwork among the non-agricultural community included my work among those engaged in the tourism industry also. As most of whom I met were not so interested in agriculture and were against the paddy and wetland conservations laws, I am including my ethnography connected to them also here.

Tourism Industry and Development

My informants include those owning homestays, resorts and houseboats. They were mainly *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians. Those owning resorts are the rich and include both insiders and outsiders. Those running homestays include middle-class to rich inhabitants. There are some other inhabitants also including some *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians who make some benefit from tourism. Some of them are those owning smaller boats and canoes to take tourists around, some are those owning restaurants and hotels and some are those owning snack shops and other shops from where the tourists could buy what they needed. However, all of them form only a minority of the population and those who are fully engaged in tourism business are very few. Apart from the big resort owners and houseboat owners most of them own paddy fields and do cultivation or lease their fields for cultivation in addition to tourism business. Hence, even many in the tourism industry are also engaged in agricultural activities. My days with them helped me to learn how the tourism industry worked in the region and also about the aspirations and perspectives of development of those related with the industry.

Kuttanad with its beautiful and unique landscape and features is highly suitable and appropriate for the development of tourism industry. Realizing the economic potential, all efforts are being taken both by the government and those interested in the industry, to develop the region into a tourist destination in Keralam and South India. Tourism is a fast developing industry in Keralam. Identifying tourism as a major foreign exchange earner to the decelerating economy of the State and understanding its possibilities, Keralam was one of the earliest Indian States to announce 'industry' status for tourism in 1986, and proclaim various incentives and subsidies

to attract investment. The tourism industry began to grow in Keralam from the 1990s and is now an important source of revenue to the State. According to Government of Kerala (2012), from hardly 50,000 foreign tourist arrivals and Rupees 0.13 billion (1,643,575.74 Euro) as foreign exchange in 1986, it has reached a status of 0.6 million foreign tourist arrivals and Rupees 37.97 billion (480,050,546.10 Euro) as foreign exchange in 2010 in the State. Total employment generated from tourism in Keralam is estimated as 1.2 million.

Tourism was one of the topics that always came up while talking about development in my study area. Several of my politician informants showed great enthusiasm while talking about the tourism industry and development. Sakku was a politician belonging to the Indian National Congress I met in Champakulam. I met him during a party meeting at Moncompu and he gave me appointment for an interview. According to him, "In the current context of 'limited' prospects of development in Kuttanad, tourism is one of the few alternatives available to 'develop' the region." Sakku sees the agricultural region of Kuttanad as an expanse with limited scope for 'development'. Obviously here, he does not mean agricultural development. There is also a hint in his statement to the resistance of the agricultural community to non-agricultural developments. Hence, he places his hope on the tourism industry to 'develop' the region.

According to Mathappai, a politician belonging to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) I met in Mampuzhakari, 'In today's world, international connections are indispensable for a region to develop. Tourism is the best opportunity for Kuttanad to develop.' Mathai's statement is also similar to that of Sakku's. They do not consider Kuttanad as a 'developed' region. Their definition of 'development' is based on comparison. They want Kuttanad to 'develop' into something that it is not, which in most cases, require the transformation of the region. The underlying element is social and economic progress. Mathappai, Sakku and several other politicians from the different political parties in Kuttanad I met were expecting domestic investments in the tourism industry. I found both the government and the inhabitants trying their best to development the tourism industry in the region.

The Green Farms Kerala project launched by the Kerala tourism department and the Responsible Tourism project in Kumarakom initiated by the Kerala Government were brought to my attention by those engaged in the tourism industry in Kumarakom. The Green Farms Kerala project enabled tourists to be part of the daily activities in the paddy fields and the cultivators to sell their products to the tourists. This was to encourage people to start small entrepreneurial activities in tourism business at the local level. The Responsible Tourism project involved the participation of local people from the *Kudumbasree*, the local self-

governments and interested inhabitants including members of the agricultural community and those fully engaged in tourism business. It was aimed to alleviate rural poverty and unemployment, preserve the natural and cultural resources and raise the self-confidence of the agricultural community, by connecting them with the international community. The revenue generated from the project is supposed to be divided among the families involved in it. However, I did not meet anyone who benefited from it during my days in the field and also, such tourism initiatives were not observed anywhere else in my study area other than in Kumarakom. I often visited Johny's restaurant in Champakulam, which served South India, North Indian and Chinese dishes. Whenever I visited the restaurant, we used to have a talk cum interview. He once told me that not even the revenue from tourism is channelized back into the community by the government. However, the tourism initiatives in Kumarakom won the national award for Best Rural Tourism Project in March 2013 and also the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Grand Award for environment management. I visited a number of homestays and resorts in the region in connection with my research about the tourism industry.

Homestays

I visited the homestay owned by Jijimon, a Syrian Christian in Champakulam. Even though he had some paddy fields, homestay business was helpful in getting some additional income now and then. He occasionally had some foreign guests but mostly the guests were from the other States of India. His children studied outside Kuttanad and were not interested in paddy cultivation. I observed that people like Jijimon, who were running homestays, did not create much harm to the environment as claimed by those opposing tourism business. I spent time with a number of people who were running homestays and things were almost the same in all the places I visited. All of them had renovated their houses to give accommodation and food to the tourists, without disrupting the environment around. Most of these houses were the ancestral houses of those running the homestays, built in the traditional architectural style and they stayed there with the tourists in the same house. Therefore, renovations were more in the way of preservation of the old style and the place. The homestay owners provided the tourists a natural experience of Kuttanad's culture. Some of them took the tourists around in their own canoe through the small rivers and canals and accompanied them to their own paddy fields to show the local cultivation practices. Some of these homestays provided traditional oil massages and herbal treatments, including *Ayurvedam*. These homestays could accommodate one to three families at a time depending upon the size of the houses. Mostly, the members of the families did all the work by themselves and only had four or five workers to assist them in serving the tourists. The number of homestays were increasing at the time of my fieldwork. Many of the former landlords from the Nayar caste and Syrian Christian community had converted their

ancestral houses into homestays and were increasingly being part of the tourism business. Some of the homestay owners were criticized by the local people for dumping their wastes into the waterbodies and also for reclaiming small portions of land from the waterbodies and paddy fields here and there.

Resorts

Resorts are different. They are more commercial in their approach. There are quite a number of resorts spread all over Kuttanad region. Most of the big resorts are owned by people who bought land from the real-estate agents. They bought these land as filled up paddy fields or as barren fields or as paddy fields itself which they filled up later to construct their resorts. In the real-estate market, the price of filled up paddy fields are higher than those unfilled. The resorts have more area for tourism activities than homestays and could accommodate many more tourists at a time. They have quite a number of staff. Among the resort owners there are politicians, people from the film industry, corporate sector, big business persons, NRIs, rich returned migrants, etc.

Pollution, Encroachments and Environmental Damages

The tourism industry, which involved both the government and the people, was in the middle of criticism and condemnation at the time of my fieldwork. Two of the most important criticisms levelled against the tourism industry are pollution of the environment and illegal land reclamations and encroachments. As it was not possible for me to measure these by myself, I had to rely on the accounts of inhabitants, articles written by others and newspaper reports to know about the harm supposedly done by the tourism industry in the region. As these are contentious issues, I maintain anonymity of informants and establishments. I came to know that when it comes to sanitation, not all resorts fulfilled all the necessary requirements of the Tourism Law. From what I learned, some of their drainages are directed into the surrounding waterbodies, leading to the pollution of the rivers and canals. This is in addition to the wastes dumped in the waterbodies. The pollution made by the houseboats, the most popular and opted means of travel by tourists was highly condemned by my informants who mostly belonged to the agricultural community. There were also a few environmental activists and social workers who criticized the tourism development in the region.

The secondary sources I went through showed that there is truth in the criticisms raised against the tourism industry. According to Government of Kerala (2012) there are about 1,000 houseboats in Kerala backwaters from basic to luxury ones. Rajan et.al (2011) maintains that the number of boats used for tourism in the Vembanad *Kayal* is much above the carrying

capacity of the lake. Most of the houseboats are dumping their wastes, which consists of plastic, food and wastes from the toilet into the waterbodies. I had also met some workers working on the houseboats in Alappuzha and Kumarakom. One of them who did not want to be identified told me that all the inhabitants, including the agricultural community, throw their wastes around. According to him, as long as there are no proper waste management policies, people would dump their wastes around. He told me to ask those blaming them and the government to first find a solution to this and then blame them. I felt that what he said was true. I had observed and learned that there is no solution to the problem of wastes in the region as I have shown in Chapter 4. Thampatti and Padmakumar (1999) and Narendran (2010) have written about the pollution created by the tourism industry in Kuttanad. These studies support what I observed and heard in Kuttanad.

The second criticism against the tourism industry is about land reclamations and encroachments. The great possibilities of developing tourism added a new dimension to land use in Kuttanad. Demand for land increased but not for paddy cultivation. This was another boost to the real-estate industry. Jayan and Sathyanathan (2010) and Rajan et.al (2011) disclose that extensive tracts of land have been filled up by the tourism industry for building resorts and tourism related constructions and infrastructures. I realized that all the places where resorts, cottages and roads were located at the time of my fieldwork were earlier paddy fields. A number of other studies that were conducted in the region also point at this. Nirmala (2010) wrote that it was with the motive of producing food that paddy fields were created in Kuttanad. It served its purpose until the 1990s, when tourism and real-estate industry started its business activities. Swaminathan (2007) also asserted that one of the main reasons behind the shrinking of paddy fields was the tourism and real-estate industries. Devayani was an Ezhava agricultural labourer from Champakulam. She was collecting lotuses from the river to take to the temple when I talked with her. While talking about the tourism industry she asked, ‘Why cannot the people who fill up fields in the name of tourism realize that the tourists come here to see the paddy fields and the nature and not the new buildings?’ I remember reading an article written by Prasannakumar (2007) that warns the government and the people engaged in the tourism industry about the environmental degradation of the lakes and trees in Kumarakom. He pointed out to them that a place becomes a tourist place because of the environment of the region, and if the environment was not taken care of, tourists will stop coming.

Even though nobody in the industry confessed to me that they have reclaimed land illegally, some of them agreed that it was happening around. Babychan is a Syrian Christian resort owner

from Ramankari.⁷¹ I visited his resort a number of times during fieldwork. According to him, as long as the conservation laws exist, the only way for enterprising and ambitious people is to break the law, fill up the paddy fields and do their business. In his view, the income generated from tourism is making the government support all kinds of developments related with the industry. He said, 'After all it is money that matters. We make more money than the paddy cultivators and hence we pay more tax. So, the government will encourage people like us.' Babychan's statement points at the politics within institutions about which Brosius (1999) wrote that privileges certain actors and marginalizes others.

Seven members of the agricultural community, environmental activists and social workers I met in Kavalam, Mampuzhakari and Mithrakari who were against the tourism industry told me that they were not against the development of the region into a tourist destination, which is a matter of pride for them also. They are opposing the industry only because almost all the undertakings of the industry is seen causing ecological damages. Chandran, a landlord-cultivator from Mampuzhakari is one of them. According to him, the tourism industry emerged in the guise of bringing 'development' to the region and the inhabitants but it only exploited and damaged the region. This statement makes the context akin to the view of Brosius (1999) that economic powers intrude into societies in the guise of supporting environment. Nanu Ashan, a Nayar teacher from Chennankari was angry when he said, "In spite of reduction in the area under paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands, food shortage in the State, floods, pollution and other environmental problems, the so called entrepreneurs continue to reclaim land, which according to them is 'development'."

The local fishing community I met in Kavalam, Kainakari and Nedumudi complained that the fuel, sewage and plastic coming from the houseboats were affecting the catch of fish. The wastes from the houseboats entered the paddy fields also, causing damage to the paddy cultivators as well. Hence, the fishermen too were strongly against the spread of tourism. As a native of the region, I have observed these troubles caused by tourism development myself. Gregory, a Latin Catholic fisherman from Champakulam appeared so irritated by what was going on and said, 'What is important for us is not tourism and *agolavathkaranam* (globalization) but our life and the region where we live.' These informants who were criticizing the tourism industry pointed out that the damage done by the tourism industry to the environment was much more than the economic benefits it brought to the inhabitants. This brings up the question, who benefitted from tourism industry?

⁷¹ I have changed the name to protect his privacy.

From what I learned, the majority of the inhabitants who were mostly full-time paddy cultivators did not have any direct benefit from tourism development. Most of the houseboats used for taking tourists around were owned by people in the neighbouring towns like Alappuzha, Kottayam, Changanassery, Cochin, Mavelikkara, Thiruvalla, Chengannur, etc. Apart from the fact that these boats passed through the lakes and backwaters of Kuttanad during their trips with tourists, very few benefited from it. However, with the progress of the industry, more and more people were getting attracted and becoming part of the industry at the time of my fieldwork. Some were engaged in tourism industry as a secondary occupation and some were even giving up paddy cultivation or leasing it out to cultivators in order to engage in tourism business on a full-time basis. Tourism was a choice often opted by the NRIs and emigrants from Kuttanad to invest their savings and remittances. Others formed part of it as workers in houseboats, resorts and homestays. Still all of them formed only a minority of the population. Hence, when profit was made by a very few in the tourism industry, the 1.6 million people who lived on the banks of the backwaters were badly affected, due to pollution and other adverse effects of land encroachments and the ecological balance of the entire region and the State was terribly getting disturbed. A small group was benefiting at the expense of others and the environment.

Shankunnimenon (2008) had written that developments in the name of tourism in Kumarakom were mere exploitation and was done in the most unscientific manner leading to environmental damage. However, I noticed that tourism development initiatives were rapidly advancing at the time of my fieldwork, in spite of all criticisms and oppositions. This context is akin to Harvey's (2003) statement that in its endless accumulation of capital and never-ending search for profit, capitalism seeks to create geographical landscapes to facilitate its activities at one point in time only to have to destroy it and build a wholly different landscape at a later point in time. This also finds parallel to Biersack's (2006) study of the Ipili environment catastrophe in Papua New Guinea. Quoting O'Conner (1988), Biersack (2006: 239) stated that capitalism suffered from a 'second contradiction' for it devoured the resources upon which its very profit depended. According to her, the bottom line of capitalism is neither society nor environment but profit. All this draws attention to Giddens's (2009) statement about the unwillingness of the people to alter their lives in the face of the threat of global warming. Even if he was writing about global climatic change, his statement is relevant in the interpretation of this context.

The statements of the informants I have included in this group show that the definition and expectations of 'development' varies from person to person. None of them is able to recognize Kuttanad as 'developed' because their notion of 'development' does not match with what is

observed in the region. The more they compared ‘development’ inside and outside Kuttanad, the more they became unsatisfied with the region and its landscapes. As their perceptions of ‘development’ are more in line with what is observed outside Kuttanad, they regard Kuttanad as undeveloped. This is a reason why they want Kuttanad to transform. They want to transform the landscapes in such a way to make it possible for them to make money. It was obvious that they regarded ‘development’ as a means to take advantage of the natural resources in Kuttanad in order to make money and to become rich. Money being their primary goal, they were seen least bothered about what happened to the environment. The ultimate reason why they want to become rich is to raise their positions in the new class hierarchy.

Group 2

Some of the inhabitants included in this group are fully engaged in agriculture but most of them are only partly engaged in it. However, they are not as dedicated as the agricultural community who are fully engaged in agriculture. Informants from this group include those living in and outside Kuttanad. Those who live in the region include landlords, landlord-cultivators and cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers. They are spread in the different villages and towns in Kuttanad. Even though they are pursuing paddy cultivation, they also favour the developments transforming the region. They are happy that rural Kuttanad is transforming into an urban landscape. They are happy about the increase in the value of their properties in the real-estate market with urbanization, the coming of roads near their properties and the new land reclamations. They are not completely against the conservation laws. I felt that many of them are a bit susceptible and could be easily traded off by those not interested in paddy cultivation for better deals. A good example is the Methran *Kayal* case mentioned in Chapter 3, where thirty-seven out of thirty-nine owners sold their paddy fields to the Rakindo company to fill up the fields for a tourism project, when they got a good price for their paddy land. Some of the people in this group showed concern and worry for the environment, especially with regard to pollution and floods. Some of them were less bothered about the ecological damages due to developments. Some of them did not seem to know how the environmental problems were connected with the new developments. They did not know that the same ‘developments’ they were wishing to happen were the reasons behind the environmental problems around them. One of the examples for this is the demand for road constructions.

The case of Rajashree, a Nayar widow in Mampuzhakari is a good instance in this context.⁷² She is a family friend and that is how I contacted her. She had her land leased out. She was

⁷² I have changed the name of this informant due to privacy reasons.

worried about the marriage of her daughter who was twenty-two at the time of my fieldwork. She told me that a number of alliances had come but nothing clicked, even though her daughter was educated. According to her, the only property they had was the paddy fields and the property where their house was located. She was planning to sell the paddy fields to give dowry. According to her, there was nobody to buy the fields because of the low demand for land in the interiors of Kuttanad in the real-estate market. She could not also sell it for low price, as she had to give a good amount as dowry, for a good alliance that will position her daughter high in the new class hierarchy. As there were no roads leading to the paddy field or to their house, many of the alliances were backing off. She said that she had told the local politicians about her predicament and requested them to build a road to her property. From what I learned, the only way a road could reach her house was by cutting her neighbour's paddy field into two. This would stop the cultivation in the neighbour's field, as it would block the drainage.

When I met her neighbour, who was another Nayar landlord-cultivator active in paddy cultivation, surprisingly he did not oppose the coming of a road. He said, 'If the road comes, I will have to make new plans, as the road would increase the value of my property also.' This case shows the lack of concern of the environmental consequences of developments like roads, among the inhabitants, which could be out of their ignorance or because of neglect. For Rajasree what is more important than the environment is a good marriage alliance for her daughter and her neighbour sees it as an opportunity to take advantage of the situation and the benefits that come out of it to rise up in the social hierarchy. Rajashree seeking the help of the local politicians to bring changes in the landscapes to her favour, also gives a good hint of the corruption prevalent in the region.

I met quite a number of people who were facing similar problems in the region connected with marriage because of the lack of road networks. Most of them had sought the help of the local politicians from the various political parties in the region to bring roads to their houses and other developments by bribing them and promising them their votes. Many other inhabitants wanted roads to reach their houses in order to buy cars or to park their cars in their own houses, instead of parking it in somebody else's house, where roads had already reached. Tharun, from Kainakari who had paddy fields of his own and who was working as a plumber in Changanassery told me that nothing is going to happen to the region and its environment if a road comes to his house. Thus continued the complaints and grumblings of my informants for developments transforming the landscapes of the region in order to bring changes in their social and economic living conditions and styles. Most of them were not thinking about the environmental consequences, in their efforts to rise up in the class hierarchy.

The change in architectural styles in Kuttanad is also a good example of the lack of concern for environment by the inhabitants in their haste to secure high positions in the new class hierarchy. The following example, illustrates the part played by consumer culture in bringing about changes in the needs and requirements of the people, making them drift away from traditional life and living styles into a more consumer-oriented lifestyle, which suits the interests of capitalism and at the same time adversely affecting the environment. The traditional houses of former landlords in Kuttanad includes an *ara* and a *pathayam* within the house. *Pathayam* is a small granary used as a locker in which precious things were kept along with the specially dried seeds stored for the next harvest. *Ara* is a massive granary built within the traditional houses. The *ara* was always positioned right at the centre of the house. The rest of the house surrounded this granary in which harvested rice was stored. The entire house stood protecting the granary. This architectural style showed the importance of paddy and paddy cultivation in the life of the inhabitants in those days.

My ancestral house in Champakulam and several of my relatives' houses in Kuttanad are built in this manner. Whenever I go to my ancestral house, I can sense the respect and veneration these houses emit in connection with paddy and paddy cultivation. Even if the meanings and morals connected with paddy cultivation has changed drastically over the years and paddy ceased to be the centre of life in the region, these houses still propagate the old values. It feels as if these houses are alive and talking. As we literally live around the granary within these houses, it feels like we are making ourselves humble and trivial as the *ara* dominates. It is like a power place in the house. It feels like the house is a mini depiction of the paddy field itself. Those who live around the *ara* are protecting the paddy stored in the *ara*, like the mud bunds protecting the paddy in the fields. With changes in architectural fashion, houses with *arakal* (plural of *ara*) and *pathayangal* (plural of *pathayam*) are fewer now in Kuttanad. I have observed during my fieldwork as well as before, the changes in the manner of house construction in Kuttanad over the years. Various writers like Nilayangod (2007) have attested to changes in house construction methods in favour of concrete structures in Kuttanad.

Most of the new buildings, houses and even renovations on traditional houses are made with concrete cement materials. The majority preferred the new architectural style, which is regarded as the 'modern style'. Whenever people acquire wealth in Kuttanad, one of the first things they do is either renovate their traditional houses into modern style or build new houses in modern architectural style. This is one of the ways people, especially *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians display their wealth. I found some *Nayanmar* and Syrian

Christians also doing the same but mostly, those from the former landlord families try to preserve their traditional homes, as it is a way of displaying their past aristocratic lineage. The modern architectural styles in some way symbolize the rise of a new class society and point at the creation of new structures by erasing the old structures.

In addition to my relatives' houses, in most of the houses I visited at the time of my fieldwork, *arakal* and *pathayangal* remained useless and the house owners complained that it was taking a lot of space in the house, which could have been used for other purposes. Now the harvested paddy is sold from the fields itself and therefore there is no need for storing them. There was a time when the inhabitants took pride in the size of their *arakal* and *pathayangal* and in the quantity of rice stored in them. Many of the renovated houses I visited had demolished and removed the *arakal* and *pathayangal*. I sensed an emptiness in these houses as if what gave them life and power has been taken out. These houses appeared sterile and barren, much like the fields that are left fallow and barren in the region nowadays. Those who demolished *arakal* and *pathayangal* either used the wood in the renovation process or sold them to antique shop dealers who bought it for cheap prices and sold at high prices. Usually the customers who were interested in buying them were related with the tourism industry, who were trying to recreate the traditional culture and architectural styles in their resorts or homestays for commercial purposes. It was an irony that those in the tourism industry renovated their houses in the traditional style, as that was what was in demand in the tourism market. Various *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians who owned old traditional houses used it for tourism, as resorts and homestays. Many of these old houses were even bought by those engaged in the tourism business who included *Nayanmar*, Syrian *Christians*, rich *Ezhavanmar* and a few Muslims in order to convert them to resorts and homestays.

I also comprehended that the new architectural styles are creating harm to the environment in Kuttanad. I brought the topic regarding architecture to all the people I met in the region during the time I was researching into the topic. Thirty of my informants from Champakulam, Pulinkunnu, Nedumudi, Chennankari, and Ramankari who were *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians pointed out that the new constructions were too heavy for the fragile ecology of Kuttanad. I noted many concrete houses in the different parts of Kuttanad either tilting to one side or sinking into the earth upon where they were built, as the soft earth in Kuttanad could not hold the heavy concrete constructions. In addition, the new methods of house construction with concrete materials hoarded more heat than traditional buildings. In the past, taking into account the hot and humid climate of Keralam, the traditional builders used natural materials like wood, mud, unburnt bricks, bamboo, straw and leaves as

building materials. They also made use of trees for shade and natural ventilation, and had the houses oriented to capture breeze. As new architectural styles are regarded as part of the 'modern' style, people build houses in the new fashion. New construction materials have filled the markets to such an extent that it is extremely difficult now to build houses in the traditional architectural style because of the unavailability of traditional building materials. When we built our house in Kottayam in 2001, my father wanted to have terracotta flooring (*thara odu*), which is one of the traditional floorings in Keralam. But it was very difficult to find shops selling terracotta floor tiles because all the tile shops in town were selling either marble or granite tiles for flooring. Only one shop sold terracotta tiles and even today, it is only that particular shop that still sells it. I remember, some of the low caste/community and new rich guests who came for our house warming, made negative comments on our terracotta flooring. Anyway, all these circumstances related with modern architectural styles necessitated the purchase of air conditioners to escape the heat.

Air conditioners are still considered a luxury in my study area. However, they are becoming popular in the houses of rich inhabitants. In the neighbouring towns, air conditioners have become necessities in houses because of the increasing heat. Temperatures have been rising in recent decades in Keralam. When the temperature hit 41 degrees Celsius, the Deccan Chronicle reported in 2016 that Keralam was experiencing the highest temperature in 29 years. As a person from Kottayam town, I know that thirty years back, the heat was not as strong as now. Quite a number of trees have been cut for both public and private development purposes like road widening and constructing buildings, which have immensely contributed in increasing the temperature. Global climatic changes could have also contributed in increasing the temperatures.

In his study of the interaction between technology and socio-cultural contexts Wilhite (2008) exposed the changed methods of house construction in Keralam, showing the role of the government in this architectural transformation that created conditions necessary for the buying of air conditioners in the State. This began from around the mid-1990s. The government's demand for pre-submission of written proposals for new constructions disfavoured the traditional artisans who lacked the writing and drafting skills to produce site plans and blueprints. When building contractors took over house construction, it began to favour the capitalists who provided the necessary construction materials that were unfavourable to the climate in Keralam. Roofs, which were constructed from thatch or locally produced tiles, were replaced with flat concrete roofs that trapped heat. Concrete structures necessitated the use of air conditioners. Wilhite explained that air conditioners had been heavily encouraged by the

transnational agents that entered the Indian market after 1991. There were only three air conditioner manufacturers producing for the Indian market in 1991, but by 2001, sixteen manufacturers had appeared, most of them subsidiaries of transnational corporations.

I met Chacko, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Chennankari during my research into the architectural changes in Kuttanad. His traditional house was renovated into modern architectural style at the time of my fieldwork. It was his neighbour, an Ezhava landlord-cultivator who informed me about his house when he heard that I was researching about architectural changes. So that is how I went to his house. Chacko's son is in the USA and it was understood that they got remittances from abroad. Following the renovation, he had fixed an air conditioner in his house. He told me that the use of the air conditioner was increasing the consumption of electricity, which made them pay high electricity bills to the government. He informed me that the government included such houses with air conditioners as luxury houses and charged extra tax. The tax increased with the number of air conditioners one had in the house.

All of this indicates the connection between the various social, economic, political and cultural sides of the consumer culture that is emerging in Kuttanad and Keralam, shedding light on Appadurai's (1988b) analysis of political mediation in the creation of value of a commodity. At the same time, it exposes how those who are striving to rise up in the social hierarchy by making use of the consumer culture are drawn into the traps of capitalism. Hence, it was understood that as the inhabitants strived to be part of the emerging class society, they tried to restructure the landscape and their dwellings to suit the new structures but this is being done without regard for the delicate ecology a region lying below sea level. All these demonstrates the changes happening in the social and physical landscapes of Kuttanad. I shall now illustrate the inhabitants I have included as group 2 in detail and show their attitudes towards the region and paddy cultivation, which greatly influence their perspectives about 'development'.

Landlords

Most of the landlords I categorized in this group owned land but leased it to cultivators interested in doing cultivation and only collected the rent. These landlords can also be termed as absentee landlords as they are not present in the fields during the different cultivation processes. Apart from collecting rent, these landlords did not want to get involved in anything connected with paddy cultivation. Most of them are rich and have income from means other than paddy cultivation. For example, some of them had estates of plantation crops in the other parts of Keralam and some of them had family members abroad who sent remittances. Hence,

they do not have to depend entirely on paddy cultivation for their livelihood. There are *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar* and Syrian Christians among them.

Problems and conflicts related with party, politics and unions were reasons why many from this group backed off from active paddy cultivation. Ramanunni was a Tamil Brahmin landlord I met in Pulinkunnu. He was a friend of my uncle who lives in my ancestral house in Champakulam and that is how I was able to contact him. While talking about the condition of paddy cultivation now, he told me, 'Times have changed. It is better to give the land to people who are proficient in dealing with the union and other hitches connected with cultivating paddy in the region.' Likewise, I also visited Mathan, a Syrian Christian landlord in Champakulam for an interview. When I asked him about the movements for the protection of the region and paddy cultivation he said, 'The decline of Kuttanad started with the coming of Communism. What more can be expected than deterioration from a region that was ruined by Communism?' Devan, was another landlord I met who was a Nayar in Ramankari. He said, 'Kuttanad is ruined. The protest movements for protecting the paddy fields are a declaration and confirmation that the Communists have failed.' I understood that even though these landlords were engaged in agriculture, they kept a good distance from it. They had no close attachments to the region or the occupation. They continued paddy cultivation mainly because they could not make use of the fields for anything else due to the environment conservation laws, rather than due to interest. As they had income from means other than paddy cultivation, which positioned most of them high in the new class society, they were not very eager to engage in paddy cultivation.

Landlord-cultivators

The landlord-cultivators in this group own land and are actively engaged in paddy cultivation, supervising the cultivation processes in their own fields. There are *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians in this group. However, the landlord-cultivators I have included in this group do not take care of their fields by doing the necessary maintenance works on time. Doing the necessary repair work is indispensable for paddy cultivation in Kuttanad because of the fragility of the fields and the ecosystem here. If such work is not done, the quality of the fields will deteriorate with every cultivation. Raghu, an Ezhava landlord-cultivator from Ramankari is an example in this context.⁷³ I met him on one of the days I visited the paddy fields in Ramankari. He was standing with the labourers in his fields when I saw him. He told me that what is important for him was to make profit. 'What is the use in over caring these paddy fields? Cultivation in these fields will soon stop in one way or the other. So, it doesn't

⁷³ Name of this informant has been changed due to privacy reasons.

really matter how you do cultivation. What is important now is whether you make money or not.’

Many of the landlord-cultivators from this group I met had a similar outlook. They also did not bother about how much chemicals they used in the fields. Itty was a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Mampuzhakari. He was engaged in spraying pesticides in his field when I talked with him. He said, ‘Poisonous chemicals are sold at subsidized rates here. The government itself has given the green signal for the use of poisons in our fields. The soil here is toxic beyond control. However, we need money to live. So, there is no other way but to cultivate on the available land.’ None of the informants in this group wanted to be part of any of the movements in the region as most of them believed that nothing would have any positive results.

Some landlords and landlord-cultivators from this group had intentions of selling their land, either the entire property or part of it, if they got a good price and move to towns. Some already had other houses in the towns. During my interactions with them, I felt that it was mainly due to loss of hope in agricultural developments, due to already failed developments that brought these informants to such a state of mind. Obviously, they are interested in paddy cultivation and are actively engaged in it. But, they have come to such a state that they no longer care how they do cultivation. Their primary goal now is the make money in order to become rich and apparently raise their position in the society.

Cultivators

The cultivators are those who take paddy fields on lease for cultivation. They pay a rent and do cultivation on another person’s field. Profit or loss, whatever comes they have it. There are *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians in this group. Some of the cultivators I met owned paddy fields and it was in addition to this they took more areas on lease to do cultivation on a larger scale, to make more money. Other cultivators I met did not own any land but did cultivation on leased land. Since they did cultivation on somebody else’s field, these cultivators whom I have included in this group had no concern for the field and did not take proper care by maintaining the fields and doing the necessary repair works on time. My informants from the agricultural community in Champakulam and Kavalam criticized them that they used maximum chemicals to reap profit. Their ultimate aim is the acquire money to become rich and to bring changes in the social composition.

Cultivator-labourers and Agricultural labourers

The cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers included those who worked both on their own fields and on others' fields as hired labourers. They included poor *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian Christians and low caste converted Christians. However, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians worked only on their own fields. Even though some Latin Catholics were seen working as hired labourers, they mainly worked on their own fields. Most of the women from these castes and communities were more interested in works related with *Thozhilurappu* and *Kudumbasree* than paddy cultivation, as the latter is a very tedious occupation. Ten cultivator-labourer and labourer informants from Kavalam, Nedumudi and Thakazhi said that it was nowadays difficult to depend entirely on paddy cultivation as the days of employment are less with the coming of machines and the shrinking of paddy fields. Some of them I met in the different villages of Kuttanad tried to engage in other occupations during the off-seasons or on a part-time basis. Most of them had family members engaged in occupations other than paddy cultivation and hence, they were in a better economic state than those who depended entirely on paddy cultivation. Even though, when compared to rich landlords and landlord-cultivators, the poor cultivator-labourers and labourers were socially rearward, they were also part of the tussle to make money and raise their position in the new class hierarchy. Hence, knowingly or unknowingly, they also supported developments that adversely affected the environment, so that they could make money and become rich.

Absentee Landlords

Apart from those engaged in paddy cultivation on a full-time basis there are also inhabitants who are absentee landlords. They do cultivation without being present in the fields. There are *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmanamar*, *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar*, Syrian and Latin Christians in this group. Some of these absentee landlords live in Kuttanad itself, like the landlords and the families of Non Resident Indians (NRI) while others live outside Kuttanad. Some of the families of the NRIs who live in Kuttanad lease out their land to cultivators. These NRI families also include those from the low castes and communities who have become rich due to migration of family members. As they get enough money as remittances from abroad, paddy cultivation is only an additional or secondary source of income for them. Apart from collecting rent from their fields, there is no need for them to work in the paddy fields. Saramma is an Ezhava in Ramankari. She is the wife of an NRI working in the Gulf. It was one of my informants from the agricultural community who helped me to contact her when I was searching for NRI families. Sarasamma told me that when thinking of the hardships and inconveniences in paddy cultivation, neither she nor her children wanted to do cultivation. That was the reason why they had leased out the land. For some other NRI families I met in Champakulam and

Kavalam who were *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Latin Catholics it was below their dignity to work in the paddy fields after becoming rich and having raised their position in the new social hierarchy. So they leased out their land for cultivation. Some families I met in Thakazhi and Karumadi were making preparations to migrate together abroad as a family. However, there were many other NRI families who did cultivation on a full-time basis also.

There are quite a number of absentee landlords living outside Kuttanad. I met some of them in Alappuzha, Changanassery and Kottayam during my fieldwork in these towns. Some of them include my family and friends. For them, paddy cultivation is only an additional source of income. A large area of land is now in the hands of absentee landlords who own either cultivated or uncultivated land. Unlike those absentee landlords mentioned in Group 1, who have left their fields barren and uncultivated, most of the people incorporated in this group, showed more interest in cultivation and leased the uncultivated land to cultivators. In the circumstances of the transforming region, with paddy cultivation increasingly disappearing, these absentee landlords were a great hope to the agricultural community I met. The implementation of environment and paddy conservation laws, which hinders the use of paddy fields for purposes other than cultivation, is attracting more absentee landlords towards leasing out their fields for cultivation as a major additional income for them.

I shall give an account of my interviews with some of these absentee landlords I met living in the neighbouring towns of Kuttanad in order to understand their perspectives and their attitudes towards the region. The monsoon flood and the resulting failure of the crop in his leased-out paddy field did not seem to have affected Thomachan, a Syrian Christian absentee landlord from Champakulam who was an engineer in Kottayam. He had collected his rent for the paddy field well in advance. I met him during one of my efforts to connect with the people who had migrated from Kuttanad. The paddy field he had was a part of the share he got from his ancestral family. He told me that he had moved to Changanassery in his 20s and then later to Kottayam where he is settled with his family. His wife is a lecturer in one of the colleges in Kottayam and his two children are studying in schools in Kottayam. He said, 'Who cares what is going on there in Kuttanad? I lease out the land I have there to those who are interested in staying on in the region.' He told me that most of his relatives had settled outside and so his family seldom goes to the region. He said that when he leases his land to someone, he makes sure that the person takes care of everything and that he does not need to go there for this and that. He told that he and his family were too busy with the life they were leading in Kottayam and so they rarely thought of Kuttanad.

Similarly, Rishand is a Latin Catholic chef working at Cochin. He is a friend of one of my informants in Changanassery. I met him when he visited my informant's house when I was there. Rishand said that he got his property in Kuttanad as dowry from his wife's family. His wife's family is still engaged in paddy cultivation on a full-time basis and so he has leased it out to them to do cultivation. They give him rent. He told me that not being a native of Kuttanad, he had no idea of paddy cultivation and so it was good that his wife's family was taking care of it and thus could get an additional income from the property. He said he hoped the conservation laws changed. According to him, it is a valuable piece of land and being a chef, he could make good money by starting a resort, a hotel or a homestay later. However, he said he is happy with what he is getting from it now. Similarly, there were many informants who owned paddy fields in Kuttanad, which they had got as part of the dowry. Renju is a Syrian Christian doctor from Thiruvalla working in a hospital in Kottayam. He told me that the rent from the leased out paddy fields was a pocket money for his wife.

Each absentee landlord I met had different stories and reasons for their various forms of relations with paddy cultivation and the region. However, almost all of them expressed that they did not have any attachment to the region or towards paddy cultivation. One of the reasons behind this was the conditions that were making life difficult for those who take up paddy cultivation. None of them was part of any movements in Kuttanad to protect the paddy and the environment mostly due to lack of time or due to lack of interest. During my interactions with the absentee landlords, I realized that most of them had good means other than paddy cultivation for livelihood and did not really depend on it for living. Whatever occupations they were engaged in, had helped them to position themselves in relatively high and satisfactory positions in the hierarchy that they were not really bothered about the problems in Kuttanad.

The people I have included in Group 2 are those who are basically interested in paddy cultivation and the region of Kuttanad but due to the failing conditions related with livelihood and occupation who are losing interest in the region and its traditional occupation. Had the conditions been better, many among them would have enthusiastically pursued paddy cultivation and taken care of the environment. As part of the social, economic, cultural and political dynamics in Keralam and India, they are also part of the social contest to rise up in the class society. Hence, they remain located in a middle position. They are part of the rice-producing Kuttanad but at the same time, they aspire for the transformation of the region to a non-rice producing tract.

Group 3

The paddy fields stretched far and wide at Ramankari. I remember me becoming completely exhausted standing under the hot sun almost the whole day with the paddy cultivators during my first visit to the paddy fields there. The next day I had a terrible headache due to the heat and fatigue but still I managed to be in the field with the cultivators. The heat of the sun pierced through my skin. After a week's work, I almost ended up getting a fever. I felt my body could not take it. I was completely tanned and burned. I did not feel like going to the fields anymore. Suddenly I thought of the paddy cultivators. They are there working in the paddy fields under the sun and the rain, throughout the year, throughout their lives. The agricultural community I met is very hardworking, optimistic, courageous and strong-willed. They know cultivation in Kuttanad is extremely tough and risky and is full of challenges. Still, they are not going to give up and they continue their lives and livelihood by being there in the field. Paddy cultivators being the majority among the agricultural community, I spend most of my time with them during fieldwork. They include landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and agricultural labourers. In this group 3, I have included those who are fully engaged in and dedicated to paddy cultivation. Hence, when I use the term agricultural community, I mean those whom I have included in this group. I tried to follow their lives and livelihood by being with them in the fields and in their existence connected with the field. The agricultural community I met was in a state of continuous resistance towards 'developments', but in favour of agrarian development of the region.

Development Outlook of the Agricultural Community and their Resistance to 'Development'

My informants who belonged to the agricultural community were disheartened and frustrated by the failed development initiatives so far undertaken by the government. As inhabitants and victims of a region that was enduring the adverse effects of developments, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, they were uniting to raise their voice to defend their occupation and protect the environment at the time of my fieldwork. The word 'development' was more a threat to these informants than hope and assurance. Still, despite all failures, regardless of suspicions, they often looked upon every new development proposal with hope. I met Anthonichan, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator during the monsoon season in Kainakari. He was visiting his paddy fields and was worried about the rising water level in the canals that flowed around the fields. According to him, this reception of development proposals indicates the agricultural community's aspiration to disentangle themselves from the catastrophes of previous development projects. Johnychan, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator in Champakulam was giving wages to his labourers when I met him. We sat on the varanda of his traditional house

and talked. In his opinion, 'Nothing much can be done for what happened in the past. The need of the hour is to take care of the matters now, for a better future. It is not practically possible to demolish Thanneermukkom Bund, Thottappally Spillway and the dams.' From my own experiences in the region, I felt that there is verity in the statements of Anthonichan and Jonychan.

Thomachan is a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Champakulam. I met him when I was visiting the Thottappally Spillway. He had come to Thottappally to meet one of his friends who was also my informant. He told me that the various governments are competing to bring development in Kuttanad. As a native of this region, I know that 'development' is a key word to success during elections, which is used by all political parties to come to power. However, I realise that the promises of political parties reflects the aspirations and desires of the people. The various political parties are basically utilizing the aspirations of the people to come to power. Pointing at a road that was build cutting across a paddy field Thomachan said, "All these irrational 'developments' you see around are the promises of different political parties to come to power." It is the faulty construction of the road, build by filling up fields, which he meant when he said 'irrational developments'. I would like to quote Pappan's statement also here in connection with this context. Pappan is an Ezhava cultivator-labourer from Moncompu. I met him during one of my visits to the paddy fields in Moncompu. According to him, 'During election time, political parties have different flag colours, but once they form the government, all of them, no matter to which party they belong, have only one flag – the flag of power and corruption.' The government's support for environment conservation as well as its support for developments adversely affecting the environment often perplexed the agricultural community. 'If it is a government that supports us, why do they encourage the filling up of paddy fields by amending conservation laws and support developments adversely affecting cultivation?' They often raised these questions throughout my fieldwork. The involvement of the different political parties and governments in the various land reclamations in the region which has been shown in Chapter 3, provides footing for their mistrust.

From my interactions with the agricultural community, they made me understand that they are not against 'developments' but only against developments that adversely affected the region and its inhabitants. During my meetings with different people who belonged to the agricultural community, I asked them the question what they considered was the appropriate development in the region. My informants included several landlords, landlord-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and labourers in Champakulam, Mampuzhakari, Ramankari, Kavalam, Mithrakari and Thakazhi. I talked with all of them separately but here I am providing a

condensed form of their accounts. According to them, the challenge is how to develop Kuttanad without adversely affecting paddy cultivation. The need is to accommodate all the different inhabitants with divergent qualifications and interests by utilizing their talents and skills for the development of the region. The protagonists of development policies and schemes should not forget the fact that this is an agricultural region, when bringing developments. Hence, infrastructural and other developments should first give preference for the development of agriculture and the agricultural region. Non-agricultural developments are also needed to accommodate the educated inhabitants, but it should be brought without adversely affecting agriculture. Such development activities must be done on lands, which are not suitable for cultivation. Hearing their statements, I was unsure and unconvinced as to how it was possible to bring non-agricultural development in an agricultural region with limited land area, without adversely affecting agriculture.

Even though the agricultural community acknowledged the advantages of the new developments put forward by the government, the policies devised for filling up the paddy fields in order to bring such developments, caused great disapproval. Panikkar, a Nayar landlord-cultivator from Pulinkunnu who was in the forefront of the struggle against new land reclamations asked me, 'Why should we regard development of a region into a corporate sector, modeled in the western style as a great advancement when it is achieved through the destruction of the environment in which we live?' It was when I visited him in his house to interview him that he told this to me. It was during the same period I met Chandran, a Nayar landlord-cultivator in Mampuzhakari. He was watching a news channel in his house when I went to interview him. When I asked him about the resistances of the agricultural community he said, 'It has been observed and recognized that whatever development that is being done here other than agriculture, is leading to the destruction of this unique geographical area. Therefore, such enterprises have to be stopped. And this is what the agricultural community is fighting for.' When we look at the development of tourism industry, commercial developments, etc. it can be seen that they are adversely affected the environment. But I understand that even agricultural developments brought in the region are also equally causing harm. So I feel that it is the manner of development followed that has to be taken into account.

From the statements of informants, I understood that for the agricultural community, 'development' was everything that helped them in their effort to cultivate paddy. Two of their main strengths were that they formed the majority in the region and the paddy fields occupied the major portion of the landscape. 80% of the population in Kuttanad are engaged in agriculture (Swaminathan 2007). However, according to Josekutty, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator

I met in Champakulam, 'Both our strengths are gradually waning away – more and more people are opting out of paddy cultivation these days and more and more paddy fields are getting filled up.' Still, I realized that most of my informants from the agricultural community in the different villages of Kuttanad were still optimistic and considered it not yet late, if acted in the proper way, to bring back Kuttanad to what it had been created for. In their view, if all the land that is left fallow in Kuttanad is brought under cultivation, the net area under paddy cultivation could be increased. As a result of the efforts of the agricultural community, in spite of land reclamations, slight increase in the area under paddy is observed in Kuttanad region from the years 2008-09 and 2011-12 (See Table 2). Hence, there is still hope!

Kuttanad Vikasana Samithy

It was when I was searching for organizations to work with, where the agricultural community were members, that I realized that apart from the labour unions that were linked to the various political parties, they did not have many forums in Kuttanad to fight for their needs and demands. Even though a number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are reported to be in Kuttanad (Thomas et.al. 2010), the only main NGO at the time of my fieldwork was the Kuttanad Vikasana Samithi (KVS), with which I worked during the initial days of my fieldwork. Although I came across self-help groups like the *Kudumbasree*, they are not used as forums to protest.

KVS is a voluntary non-profit organization initiated by the Catholic Church in Keralam involving around 15,000 members from the agricultural community formed in 1993 for the agricultural 'development' of Kuttanad. The office of the Samithy is located at Mampuzhakari. At the time of my fieldwork until June 2018, Thomas Peelianickal, a Catholic priest, was its Executive Director. Both KNGO (Kuttanad Non-Governmental Organization) and KVS are influenced by the Church. However, during fieldwork I realized that KVS function as a religiously inclusive organization. Several of its members are Hindus. The officers working in KVS, including its then director Thomas Peelianickal and those from the agricultural community who are members of the Samithi told me that the organization showed no discrimination on the basis of religion, caste or community in helping those engaged in agriculture. Another related aspect is the ideologically opposite stance of the Communists and the Church in Keralam. The situation and functioning of KVS in Kuttanad, a hub of the Communists was paradoxical. Though the sharp divide between the Church and the Communists has narrowed down over time, differences still persist on approach and policies. However, as the KVS was opposing the policies and projects of both the LDF and the UDF governments, I do not think that the organization showed any distinct prejudice against the Communists. Moreover, KVS even has

members with left inclinations. However, I did not go deep into the issue of the skirmish between the Church and the Communists during my research period.

KVS was an influential organization at the time of my fieldwork, especially until 2018. It was slowly developing into a local movement, taking up wider socio-economic and environmental issues confronting Kuttanad. From what I learned, the Samithy intervened in all the development projects implemented in the region, especially when things turned out to be against the region and the inhabitants, either to protest or to question, or to bring forth the adverse effect of such developments before the public. The organization provided alternatives for development. The members of the Samithy being the agricultural community, who worked close with the land and the water, they had a thorough knowledge of the complex link between geography and existence in Kuttanad. Hence, they acted as a check on both the LDF and UDF governments – co-operating as well as conflicting. As written by Thomas et.al (2010) in their study of the Kuttanad NGO, KVS also ‘lived in a vicious hybrid of accommodation and rejection, closeness and alienation with the government.’ My contact with the KVS was helpful for me in the beginning of my fieldwork, as I came to meet many people who were relevant for my research through the Samithy. It gave me an opportunity to come across paddy cultivators from the different villages of Kuttanad, both members and non-members of the Samithy. An extraordinary event happened at the time of my fieldwork in connection with the KVS, which I would like to mention next.

Thomas Peelianickal

All throughout my fieldwork, Thomas Peelianickal was a full presence in all the major events related with paddy cultivation and the environment - supporting the agricultural community and working for/with them to place their demands before the government, to facilitate credit facilities for them and to protest against the various projects that were against the environment and paddy cultivation/cultivators. In the newspapers, his pictures or his opinions were always seen given great importance in everything related with environment, paddy cultivation and development in Kuttanad. He occupied an important place in all the political and social meetings related with the region. When I visited his office, I noticed a shelf full of State and National awards acknowledging the Samithy’s and his efforts.

Sixteen cultivators, cultivator-labourers and labourers I met in Champakulam, Kavalam, Mampuzhakari, Ramankari and Mithrakari who were *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians said that if they approached Peelianickal for help, he would somehow find some solutions to their problems related with paddy cultivation and the environment. There was a

general impression among my informants that he will not leave behind those who seek his help no matter to which religion, caste or community they belonged. Many had a feeling that the Catholic Church being a prominent religious organization with immense wealth in Kerala and being a priest, he had social and political contacts and influence. According to the church records I came across in a Syrian Christian church in Kottayam, the Catholic Church runs 25,000 educational institutions, 6000 hospitals and countless orphanages and charity institutions in India. Hence, there is a good reason behind such beliefs of the people. However, there were some who criticized him also. During my fieldwork, I realized that apart from the activities conducted within the church related to its members, the Catholic Church was found least interested in the affairs of the grieving agricultural community in Kuttanad. This was unlike the attitude of the church in cash crop producing areas of the Western Ghats, which is also an area where a large number of rich Christians live. The interest and involvement of the church in the political struggles against the environment conservation reports of Gargil and Kasthurirangan that were brought restricting non-environment friendly 'developments' is an example of the Church's interest in profit zones. I am not going into that topic now as I think it is outside the area of my research. Hence, apart from the Church's part in forming the KVS, they did not interfere much with the affairs in Kuttanad. As I understood, Peelianickal was left to himself to deal with the situation in Kuttanad.

I met Peelianickal quite a number of times during the course of my fieldwork in his office and with the agricultural community in the paddy fields, a few times with those removing waterweeds, and during various political and social meetings. Even though Kuttanad is a hub of Communism, the region enjoys religious harmony between the Hindus and the Christians and the majority of the inhabitants are highly religious. Being a priest, he was highly respected and his priesthood enabled him to stand as an intermediary in conflicts, and social and political agreements. His image, a priest in white robes, commanded respect. It was a bit extraordinary to see him walking in his white robe that symbolized purity, through the polluted paddy fields and working with the 'impure' paddy cultivators. He seemed like the odd one out in the context of my study area. No other priests were seen walking around in the region and doing service like him to people, irrespective of their religion. While all the other priests were found active only in their local churches, his deeds were outside the limits of the church. He himself once told me that he is considered as a deviant in the church. But his deviance, I comprehended, made him unique and popular in the region. There were even two of his acquaintances who told me that he might even be declared as a saint in future for his work among the poor agricultural community. Kerala being a State that contributed four saints to the Catholic Church, the context of this statement is understandable.

It was a great shock for me when I read in the news in June 2018 that Peelianickal was arrested for agricultural loan fraud. The Hindu (June 2018) have covered this case in detail. Of the fourteen cases registered in Kuttanad, he was accused in six cases. NCP leader Rojo Joseph was the first accused in the case. Rojo belonged to the same political party as ex-Minister Thomas Chandy who was involved in the illegal land reclamation case in Kuttanad in November 2017. Another accused was Thresiyamma, a female staff in the KVS. Peelianickal had allegedly acquired loans by forming self-help groups under various names and forged documents of several farmers for availing loans from different banks in Alappuzha. The loan fraud came to light when Shaji, a native of Kavalam, revealed that Karshaka Mithra Nel Karshaka Samithy, a joint liability group formed under KVS took a loan of Rupees 0.5 million (5,845.50 Euro) from Canara Bank in his name. Though he was not a member of that group, he received revenue recovery notice from the bank. Police registered the first case against Peelianickal after a woman filed a complaint. She was a member of Mithrakari Nel Karshaka Samithy. She complained that after arranging a bank loan of Rupees 0.54 million (6,632.10 Euros) for a six-member group, Peelianickal demanded Rupees 30,000 (368.43 Euro) from each member when the loan was sanctioned and that provided him a total of Rupees 0.18 million (2,104.38 Euro). He had agreed to return the money whenever they needed it. After one year, when the members approached Peelianickal for their money, he refused to return the sum.

The arrest and the events that followed was a great astonishment to many, especially the agricultural community. When I reached the field a month later in July, I could still sense the density of feelings. Many could not believe that such a thing happened. The critics of Peelianickal appeared as if they were expecting this sooner or later. There was an unfathomable stillness among the agricultural community that worked with Peelianickal. Raghavan, an Ezhava landlord-cultivator from Pulinkunnu was the first person to respond. I visited his house after this event. He was reading the newspaper when I arrived. Putting aside his newspaper, he talked to me. The first thing he said was, 'Hope you heard the news. He was our last piece of straw. He too deceived us.' I also visited Moncompu during this time to observe and hear my informants. Pappan, an Ezhava cultivator-labourer from Moncompu seemed completely taken aback, "I can't believe this.⁷⁴ I wish it was a false case. But I know it is not. If 'he' is doing such a thing to us, then why blame the other crooks – the politicians and the *muthalalikal*?" There was great disappointment and helplessness in the tones of Raghavan and Pappan when they said this to me.

⁷⁴ Pappan is a male cultivator-labourer.

I met many who were terribly upset and who could not accept the fact that Peelianickal was tricking them. It was surprising that there were no protest gatherings against the arrest of Peelianickal even by those whom he had been helping for years. Even though a number of Ezhava, Pulaya and Syrian Christian informants in Mampuzhakari, Kainakari, Ramankari and Champakulam had the opinion that it was the NCP leader Rojo who dragged Peelianickal into the case, I could not see anyone coming forward in full support of Peelianickal. The reasons behind this passivity could be many. During the same period when Peelianickal was arrested for fraud case, a number of other priests from different denominations of the Christian church were arrested for rape and other criminal cases in Keralam. Therefore, there was a general impression at that time that there was something wrong going on in the church and that the priests are not trustworthy. Moreover, there could be clear evidences against Peelianickal. I also got the feeling that the people had become so numb and perplexed by such a dreadful news that they lost all their energy to protest again. Above all, they do not have a leader or any other organization to unite and protest. Later during my fieldwork, the church helped Peelianickal to get bail. A new priest is now appointed as the Executive Director of the KVS. The case was still going on in the court when I left the field in October 2018. The Samithy and the agricultural community had not succeeded in their struggle for the conservation of the region and the livelihood, even when my fieldwork ended. Yet, they were seen united and fighting ‘development’. Their resistance still continues. Following the arrest of Peelianickal, the KVS became completely inactive and the office remained completely closed until the new priest took over.

Achievements of the Agricultural Community

Kittunni is an Ezhava cultivator-labourer in Kannadi. After the day’s work in the paddy fields, he was getting ready to go for fishing when I met him. I got on to the canoe with him and we talked while he prepared the net for fishing. He told me that if the agricultural community was not fighting and defending the environment from land reclamations, ‘the food growing fields would have been filled up and converted into something else long back by the government and the *muthalalikal* (capitalists).’ There is truth in what he said. The Methran *Kayal* case and the Aranmula Airport case mentioned in Chapter 3 are good examples. Such development projects would have filled up huge hectares of paddy fields, if there had not been local resistance. In spite of occasional setbacks like the passing of the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act of 2018 at the time of my fieldwork, the agricultural community and those who stood for the protection of the region seemed determined in their stand. The inclusion of Kuttanad as a Ramsar Site and as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage

System (GIAHS) are other achievements of their efforts.⁷⁵ These recognitions for Kuttanad guarantees local and international efforts for the conservation of not only its rice history but also its rich biodiversity and genetic resources. Chochayi, a Syrian Christian cultivator-labourer from Moncompu was waiting for the boat service at the boat jetty to go to the nearby village when I met and talked with him. I knew him from the KVS context. He said, ‘We are trying to get all kinds of national and international titles to Kuttanad, so that the region gets noticed in the conservation map of India and the world and thereby remains protected.’

The agricultural community was also trying to bring back the barren, uncultivated and reclaimed fields back to cultivation, as part of their development efforts. I understand that this is the reason why there has been an increase in the area under paddy in Kuttanad region from the years 2008-09 and 2011-12 as shown in Table 2. The Hindu (June 2016) reported the initiative of the Left Government to bring the Methran *Kayal* back to cultivation after a decade since it was left uncultivated. This tendency could be seen all over Keralam, but on a limited scale. Government of Kerala (2009) showed that after a long period of continuous decline, the area under paddy in Keralam increased from 0.229 million hectare in 2007-08 to 0.234 million hectare in 2008-09. An Analytical Study on Agriculture in Kerala (2016) also showed increase in the area under paddy in Kuttanad from 2005-2015. All this indicates the efforts made by the agricultural community to regain the lost fields and the disappearing traditions. It clearly exposes the contest for natural resources going on in the region.

Many of my informants from the agricultural community who worked mostly under the guidance of the KVS were infuriated that they had to put a lot of pressure on the government be it the LDF or the UDF to make the government take measures to support their endeavours to protect the environment. Moreover, what annoyed them most was the government claiming credit for agricultural developments, disregarding their efforts, in order to come to power in the next election. This was mentioned by many landlords, landlords-cultivators, cultivators, cultivator-labourers and labourers I met in Champakulam, Ramankari, Mithrakari and Puthukari who were *Nayanmar*, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and Syrian Christians. In the view of my informants, if there had been no elections, they would have been completely neglected by the political parties and governments. The fact that the agricultural community comprises

⁷⁵ In response to the global trends that undermine family agriculture and traditional agricultural systems, in 2002, during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, Johannesburg, South Africa), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations launched a Global Partnership Initiative on conservation and adaptive management of GIAHS. The overall goal of the partnership is to identify and safeguard GIAHS and their associated landscapes, agricultural biodiversity and knowledge systems by catalyzing and establishing a long-term programme to support such systems and enhance global, national and local benefits derived through their dynamic conservation, sustainable management and enhanced viability (Koohafkan and Altieri 2011). FAO has recognized the adventurous farming community of Kuttanad for their ingenious and traditional farming practice at below mean sea level situations by declaring Kuttanad as a GIAHS.

the major portion of the vote bank in the region is indeed a strength for them. It could be said that in the absence of a powerful leadership and organization, their number speaks for them.

Conservation Efforts of the Agricultural Community

Two of the major conservation efforts I came across at the time of my fieldwork were organic farming and fish farming in the paddy fields. Even though some initiatives were taken by the LDF Government in the 2000s to promote organic farming in Kuttanad, it did not become popular because not many were ready to take it up on a regular basis. While talking about organic farming, Raman, a Pulaya agricultural labourer from Kavalam said that it is difficult to return to traditional ways of agriculture now as the soil is severely damaged by the recurrent use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides for the past many years. I have already written about the overuse of chemicals in the fields in Kuttanad in Chapter 4. According to Raman, it will take years to 'heal' the soil. Raman was repairing the outer bunds in the paddy fields in Kavalam under the hot sun when I met him. In his view, during the transformation period, the yield may fall and would push the agricultural community further into debts. This in turn would also divert them from paddy to more lucrative crops, thereby endangering paddy cultivation. These fears were raised by several paddy cultivators I met in the field and hence, only very few ventured into organic farming.

The second conservation effort was bringing back the age-old practice of fish farming in the paddy fields, either together with rice or after the harvesting of paddy, so that the fish could feed on the grass and stubble left after cultivation. In turn, fish waste and feed could be used as manure for the next crop, creating an interwoven cycle that would enhance the biofertility of the region. An integrated rice-shrimp/prawn cultivation also provides a substantial subsidiary income to the cultivators, in addition to animal protein in their diets. I learned that this practice reduces the cost of production of rice, as after the fish/prawn harvest, the soil is ready for immediate seeding and transplanting. It is also assumed that pisciculture and organic farming would lead to increase in the population of fishes and frogs in rivers and streams, which would in turn lead to the reduction of the mosquito menace in the region.

When a minority were attempting to promote organic farming and pisciculture, the majority felt that it is safer to follow a middle path taking the good aspects of both traditional and modern methods of cultivation. Nevertheless, they all wanted to bring back the traditional agricultural system, which was built on local knowledge and experience, followed for generations in the region based on a deep relationship with nature. It had helped to maintain and sustain biodiversity and the resilient ecosystem in the region in the past. They stood for sustainable

development including the well-being of both environment and human beings. They wanted to preserve the indigenous techniques of doing paddy cultivation below sea level, which is seen nowhere else in the world.

The resistance of the agricultural community continues in Kuttanad. The outcome is imminent. Environment related resistance movements are not new in Kerala. Kerala has a history of environmental social movements, which has won victories many times against the iron hands of the powers that be. The historic Silent Valley Movement, the Chaliyar River Movement, the Movement against Coca Cola factory in Palakkad and other environmental movements, all led by local communities and supported by social activists are hallmarks in the history of people's movements in Kerala. The resistance of the agricultural community in Kuttanad do not have any direct connections with any of the global environmental movements. They started their struggle when they saw their environment deteriorating right in front of their eyes. Thirty of my agricultural community informants from Kavalam, Champakulam, Mithrakari, Pulinkunnu and Thakazhi raised their concerns about the global climatic changes. They were especially mentioning the melting of the polar ice leading to sea level rise, which can dangerously affect the Kuttanad region, already lying below sea level. Therefore, according to these informants, they are fighting for nature, upon which the survival of the entire human race depends. Hence, some of them claimed that their local struggle was thus, linked to the global issue of survival. Raghavan, an Ezhava landlord-cultivator from Pulinkunnu who was one among them said, 'Unless our worldview about our environment and our lifestyle is restructured, the very survival of humanity will be threatened.' His statement is reminiscent of Heidegger's (1977) view that our orientation towards technology must change. It had been observed that the resistances of the agricultural community in Kuttanad are minor in the form of strikes and *sathyagraham* in front of government offices or in public places. No violent forms of resistance have been observed neither during the time of my fieldwork nor in the last fifty years or more.

The Agricultural Community and Transformations

During my days in the field, I realized that it was difficult and almost impossible even for the agricultural community to keep themselves aloof from the changing lifestyles in Kuttanad. The people and the world around them were influencing their perspectives making them mould and remould their thoughts. I found them struggling somewhere in the middle between tradition and the emerging consumeristic world that was rearing its head in Kerala and India. Even though they had deep attachments and commitments to their land and occupation, they were part of the social tussle to rise up in the new social hierarchy. They were making useful compromises with the emerging culture, even to deploy its techniques and ideals – in the course of distinguishing

their own. Sahlins (2000: 493) contended that in any local sector of the global system, the transformation assumes the dual appearance of assimilation and differentiation. The local people articulate with the dominant cultural order even as they take their distance from it, jiving to the world beat, while making their own music. I sensed desire, at the same time fear, among my informants from the agricultural community about the new ‘developments’ that were transforming their region. It is possible to sense the meeting of two forms of existence. There is conflict at the same time, assimilation.

The Contested Landscape

The language of the agricultural community and the non-agricultural community were so entirely different, that they could not always understand and acknowledge each other. The non-agricultural community could not understand the attachment of the agricultural community to the region or the meaning of their struggle for conservation of the paddy fields. In the same way, the agricultural community could not recognize the new developments that were transforming their landscapes leading to the disappearance of their paddy fields and the waterbodies – their lives and livelihood. Nevertheless, all of them are trying to exploit and make maximum profit from the resources in the region. Be it the agricultural community or the non-agricultural community, their aim is to acquire wealth for personal well-being which would ultimately help them to raise their status in the social hierarchy. The idea of future remains conflicted between those who want to ‘develop’ Kuttanad as an agricultural region and those who want to ‘develop’ it into a non-agricultural region. However, contest and exploitation of resources make the environment in Kuttanad remain exposed, ultimately leading to its neglect and degradation.

This chapter exposes the different meanings different people attach to the same place as pointed out by Tuan (1975), Rodman (1992), Feld and Basso (1996) and Joniak-Luthi (2015) and the contest over resources leading to the commodification of land as pointed out by Ingold (2000). It is possible to identify the impact of the meeting of the capitalist lifeworld and the local lifeworld as pointed out by Brosius (1999), Biersack (2006) and Tsing (2015) and the merger of the lifeworlds as stated by Taussig (1977), Appadurai (2000a), Sahlins (2000) and Tsing (2005). However, the outcome of the fusion remains ambiguous. The slow penetration of the capitalist market economy into local contexts with the support of the government and the way it changes people’s attitude towards traditional structures resulting in decontextualized constructions, similar to the analysis made by Scott (1998) and Harvey (2003), can be traced here. The chapter displays the way people respond to developments as shown by Tsing (1993). It is very much possible to perceive the fusion of development aspirations and social mobility

desires of the people. This chapter brings up the need for sustainable development similar to what Heidegger (1977), Carson (1962), Giddens (1996 and 2009), Lovelock (2000) and Chakrabarty (2009) expounded.

Conclusion

Chapter 9 depicts the inhabitants' reactions to the various development initiatives undertaken in Kuttanad and their conflicting development outlooks. It exposes the aspirations and concerns of the people living in a transforming landscape. Having understood the development viewpoints of the inhabitants, the next Chapter 10, looks into the development views of the government.

Part III

Chapter 10

Development Perspectives in Kuttanad – Perspectives of the Government

Having elucidated the development perspectives of the people in Kuttanad in Chapter 9, Chapter 10 explicates the development perceptions of the government. The government of Kerala is a democratically elected body. The State is headed by the Governor and the Chief Minister.⁷⁶ Elections are held every five years. Even though there are more than fourteen political parties in Kerala, politics in the State is dominated by two political fronts that have alternated in power since the late 1970s - the CPI (M) led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Indian National Congress led United Democratic Front (UDF).⁷⁷

When my informants refer to, 'the government', they are referring either to the UDF or the LDF government. Normally, my informants only said, 'the government', without specifying any particular party-led fronts. One reason for this could be that the policies and programmes brought by both the UDF and LDF governments are not very different and the change in governments are not bringing much change in the everyday life in the region. Illegal land reclamations continue no matter which government is in power, their distress related with floods, waterweeds, pollution, drinking water, and so on, continue regardless of which government is in power, their problems related with cultivation is the same irrespective of governments and their resistance to developments continue whichever party is in power. When I started my fieldwork in 2015, the UDF was in power with Oommen Chandy as Chief Minister. In the 2016 Kerala Legislative Assembly Election, the LDF came to power with Pinarayi Vijayan as Chief Minister. The political parties prevalent in Kuttanad are Indian National Congress, Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (Mani) Nationalist Congress Party, Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marixist). Hence, my politician informants belong to these political parties.

The development perspectives of the government is traced mainly through the accounts of my politician informants belonging especially to the UDF and LDF. I met these politicians during

⁷⁶ Governor is the nominal head of the State and the Chief Minister is the democratically elected real head of the executive.

⁷⁷ The chronology of Kerala Governments: 1957–59 – Communist Party of India, 1959–1960 – President's Rule, 1960–1964 – Initially Praja Socialist Party and then Indian National Congress, 1964–1967 – President's Rule, 1967–1970 – Initially Communist Party of India (Marxist) and then Communist Party of India, 1970 – President's rule, 1970–1977 – Community Party of India, 1977–1979 – Initially Indian National Congress, then Communist Party of India and finally Indian Union Muslim League, 1980 – President's rule, 1980–1982 – Communist Party of India (Marxist) and President's Rule for a few months, 1982 – 1987 – Indian National Congress, 1987–1991 – Communist Party of India (Marxist), 1991–1996 – Indian National Congress, 1996–2001 – Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2001–06 – Indian National Congress, 2006–11 – Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2011–16 – Indian National Congress, From 2016 – Communist Party of India (Marxist).

the various political, social and cultural meetings and gatherings in the region. Political processions, rallies and protest meetings were also venues where I met them. I also visited some in the party offices in the different parts of Kuttanad. I found others in different villages on random occasions. Accounts of the agricultural community and the non-agricultural community have also been used to follow the government policies and programmes. A number of secondary sources like books and articles are also included in the analysis of the ethnographic data.

My social background and political setting might have affected my interactions with the politicians. Even though I do not have any particular inclination towards either UDF or LDF, I felt that some of my politician informants belonging to both these fronts assumed that I am a UDF supporter. This feeling is because generally the Syrian Christians in Kottayam area are regarded as supporters of the UDF. Hence, the politicians belonging to the UDF often talked to me as if talking to a member of the Congress Party itself. They used the word 'we' and 'us' and included me as one among them while talking to me. On the other hand, I felt that the Communists kept a distance. The fact that I belong to a former landlord family who are still wealthy in the region and hence who still belong to the 'bourgeoisie/capitalist class' influenced our interactions. This was evident in their comments during our communications. They used to say, 'your *muthali* (capitalist) people', 'when you *muthalikal* (capitalists) were dominating this region,' etc. Even though they talked like this to me as a joke and in a friendly teasing manner, it revealed the way they placed me. However, politicians belonging to both UDF and LDF cooperated to my research and provided me information on the various topics and concerns I raised.

My field visits also included government offices in the different villages of Kuttanad where I met a number of bureaucrats also. The majority of the officials were not natives of Kuttanad but came from different parts of Keralam. Even though the officers I met had their own views about development, I realized that when compared to politicians, they almost had no power in the formulation of development plans. They simply executed the development projects approved and sanctioned by the government of the different political parties whether it is for the good of the region or not. Even though some had strong opinions either against or in favour of the activities of the different governments, it seemed like they did not want to invite trouble and ill will of political parties and their governments. Therefore, majority of the officers I met remained neutral in their opinions to the questions I raised. During my interactions, I noticed that the word 'development' dominated the conversation I had with the different politicians and bureaucrats. All the politicians I met gave importance to 'development' and all political parties stood for 'development'. Chapter 10 explores the development inclinations of both the LDF

and the UDF by tracing the views on development put forward by politicians belonging to both fronts.

Development in the Social and Physical Landscapes

In the view of almost all my politician informants from all the different political parties, ‘development’ is indispensable for the welfare of the inhabitants and the region. This inspired me to ask the politicians I met the question, ‘What is development for them?’ Their answers reverberated the political stand of the political parties to which they belonged and hence the political perspective of the government they formed. My meetings and interviews with the politicians belonging to Indian National Congress, Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (Mani) Nationalist Congress Party, Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marixist) provided me the substance of what their governments meant by development. In some instances, I felt that the development perspectives of the politicians belonging to the LDF and the UDF remained very similar. I am giving a concise account of what three politicians belonging to the Indian National Congress and two politicians belonging to the Communist Party of India told me regarding development. According to them, ‘development’ is the transformation of a region, both the natural and human resources for the benefit and well-being of human beings. This includes social development, which is brought by bringing progressive measures in areas like education, health, social and religious reforms, etc. that leads to social transformation. Sometimes, social transformation and development requires physical transformation of the landscape, that is, changes in the land utilization pattern. These transformations will automatically bring economic upliftment and development, which ultimately brings benefit to the people. In my informants’ opinion, the government brings development projects for the ‘common good’ and hence, the people must cooperate with the government.

Renjith, is a politician from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) I met in Nedumudi in 2017 when LDF was in power. He pointed out that Keralam has made tremendous achievements by way of social developments. Emphasizing the Kerala Model of Development, he pointed out that despite low income the State has high literacy rates, healthy citizens and a politically active population. He noted that the human development indices show a high standard of living in Keralam, which is comparable to life in developed nations and this is widely considered to be the highest in India. This is a debated question and criticized issue related with Keralam.

Even though it is a politician from the CPI (M) who praised the Kerala Model of Development, it has to be mentioned that in spite of all the short-comings of the Kerala Model of Development,

whatever social development attained by Keralam is a joint effort of both the LDF and the UDF. Despite applauding the Kerala Model, Renjith pointed out that despite having high standards of human development, the Model ranks low in terms of industrial development. He stated that the high rate of education in the State has resulted in a brain drain, with many citizens migrating to other parts of the world for employment. The job market in Keralam is forcing many to relocate to other places. In Kuttanad, this is observed by way of labour shortage, unemployment and migration. According to him, this has to change, and the only way it is possible is by bringing infrastructural developments, which requires the physical transformation of the landscape. He believed that transformation of the physical landscape and changes in the land utilization pattern would lead to economic developments and more social progress.

Even though he hinted about land reclamations while talking about change in the land utilization pattern, in response to my questions related with land reclamations, he completely opposed reclamation activities and supported the conservation laws in Kuttanad. Hence, I noticed a contradiction in his statement. From our conversation, I got the impression that even though he supported the physical transformation of Kuttanad through land reclamations, he had to support conservation efforts also, in order to win elections in a region dominated by the agricultural community. Almost all the politicians I met from all the other political parties in the region also told me that lack of infrastructural developments was the reason for the region's slow development. Hence, all of them gave importance to infrastructural developments. This was reflected in the numerous roads that were being constructed all over Kuttanad by the UDF and the LDF. This takes us to the ethnography on the importance given to infrastructural developments.

Infrastructural developments are regarded as major developments by the politicians/government, the bureaucrats and also the inhabitants. Joseph is a politician from the Indian National Congress in Mampuzhakari. I met him during a party meeting in the village in 2015 when UDF was in power. He said, 'Earlier we used to go for election campaigns on boats and canoes. Now we go by jeeps and cars, as we have managed to bring roads to almost all corners.' He narrated how the coming of roads drastically transformed the landscape and the lifestyle in the region and his party's contribution in the transformation. He emphasized that his party, which implies his government, has no other goals but the comfort and welfare of the people. He also pointed out to me that all the developments I saw at the time of my fieldwork were brought for the people with their full support. He was trying to convince me that whatever the UDF was doing was for the 'common good' taking into consideration the needs and wants of the people and not a development project forcefully imposed by the government. However,

it has to be remembered that even though the first government in Keralam came to power in 1957, it was only after 2008 that almost all the roads had been constructed as mentioned in Chapter 4. Hence, it can be seen that for fifty-one years there had not been much infrastructural developments in the region, indicating the fact that these developments are part of the new economic policies pursued by the government. It was during the period of the UDF that the doors of Keralam were opened to new economic policies. However, both the UDF and the LDF have contributed in the later developments that happened in Keralam in relation with the new economic policies.

Mathew, another politician from the Indian National Congress I met together with Joseph pointed out that development of roads paved way for economic and social developments. In his opinion, roads increased mobility in the region. With the coming of roads, buses reach far and wide. Almost all the households near the roads now own vehicles enabling many to be employed in the neighbouring towns and providing opportunities for many to start new enterprises. This made many youngsters who were remaining unemployed until then to take up jobs as taxi/auto/truck/bus drivers etc. However, it still has not solved the problem of unemployment in the region. He pointed out that the coming of roads was also helpful for the paddy cultivators. Harvested paddy could be taken to the storage places much faster than before. Earlier it used to be carried on huge boats called *kettuvallangal*, which took time. Likewise, machines, fertilizers and all that are necessary for cultivation could be brought to the fields easily. He was highlighting the benefits of infrastructural development to people from all walks of life in the region. He asserted that the economic development attained as a result of these changes paved the way for social progress as well. Even though this was stated by a politician belonging to the UDF in 2015 at a time when UDF was in power, it has to be noted that the LDF governments that were in power before the UDF came to power in 2011 has also contributed in building roads in the region. Hence, the roads seen in Kuttanad are contributions of both the UDF and the LDF.

Several other politicians I met from other political parties like the Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (Mani), CPI, CPI (M) and NCP also had similar stories to tell me about the advantages of the development of transport and communication in the region, which is a major alteration made on the physical landscape of Kuttanad. As if taking into account the criticisms raised by the agricultural community, George, a politician from the NCP whom I met in Mampuzhakari who was a part of the coalition forming the ruling LDF told me that unlike other parties, his party and government took care of both the people's needs and the environment, when building roads. According to him, while laying out roads, they made sure that it did not hamper paddy

cultivation and the environment. However, his statement was not completely true as I found roads adversely affecting the ecology built during the time of different governments and sometimes it is not possible to differentiate between governments because the construction of a road started by one government would be completed by another government. However, George put all the blame for environmental degradation on other political parties in the same way as politicians belonging to other political parties said to me. In this way, the politicians I met upheld the infrastructural developments in the region under their respective governments. From the empirical information I collected, I realized that both the UDF and the LDF gave importance to the development of social and physical landscapes of Kuttanad. Social development is the ultimate aim of both the fronts. However, for about the last two decades, they have been focusing on the development of the physical landscape of Kuttanad to achieve their ultimate aim of social development. They tried to bring development in the physical and social landscapes by building roads/infrastructures in the region.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that tourism industry and infrastructural developments progressed parallel to each other in Kuttanad and was given equal importance by all the politicians I met from all the different political parties in the region. Politicians from the Kerala Congress and the CPI, I met in Kavalam and Ramankari had the opinion that both tourism development and infrastructural developments are related and infrastructural developments are helping the tourism industry to expand. The tourism industry was looked upon with hope for attracting investments for bringing further developments in the region. Hence, investments were very much sought after by both UDF and LDF. Therefore, I grasped that there is a connection between the physical transformation of the landscapes through infrastructural development and investments.

Investments for Developments

Mohan, a politician from the Indian National Congress I met in Ramankari, asserted that the main reason for giving importance to infrastructural developments is to attract investments that will help in bringing further developments. I met Mohan in 2017 when the LDF was in power. I remember reading an article written by Oommen Chandy, the former Congress Chief Minister of Kerala, which shows the importance given to investments by the UDF. Chandy (2011) wrote that investments are most necessary in Kerala for generating new employment opportunities and wealth. He stated that it was the UDF Government that made Kerala an investment friendly State by inviting foreign investments. He pinpointed that as per the World Bank report for 2005, (when Congress was in power), the second best investment friendly State in India was Kerala. However, he cited that in the World Bank report for 2009, (when the CPI

(M) was in power), the worst investment friendly State in India was Kerala. He pointed out that those who suffered the most due to this condition were the educated in the State. It was leading to the unemployment of millions of people. He noted that it was to attract investments, that metros, highways and airports were being built. This was often one of the explanations given by the different governments for the various infrastructural developments undertaken in Kuttanad, which involved the filling up of paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands. Since the late 1980s, the government has been trying to make policies in favour of investments. However, it has been observed that increase in private investments are leading to increase in privatization of services like health, education, etc. in the State thereby making such services inaccessible to the poor in the State.

According to politician informants from the INC, Kerala Congress, Kerala Congress (Mani), CPI and CPI (M), several infrastructural plans had to be given up in Kuttanad due to opposition from the agricultural community. According to some of those politicians who had this opinion, the agricultural community does not understand the worth of development programmes and projects. In this background of conflicting interests, as my fieldwork proceeded, I realized that infrastructural and other non-agricultural developments in Kuttanad went along with wide protests from the agricultural community. It reveals the contest over resources in Kuttanad and the determination of both the LDF and the UDF governments to 'develop' the region along capitalist lines and exposes the importance given by them to capitalist development. The involvement of both UDF and LDF in the various development projects involving land reclamations mentioned in Chapter 3 is proof for this. Hence, I realized that the physical landscapes of Kuttanad was transformed by the government through infrastructural developments in order to attract investments for further development of the region to boost capital. The empirical data I collected gave me an impression that Kuttanad, being predominantly an agricultural region with the majority engaged in agriculture and therefore resisting developments other than agricultural developments, the government has to bring non-agricultural developments in a very strategic manner. They have to get the votes of the agricultural community who form the majority to gain or remain in power, at the same time, they have to prepare the region for capitalist developments in order to enhance capital. Hence, they have to please the agricultural community in order to get their votes and therefore they have to have a double stand in their development approach. Now I shall try to explain this.

Development Strategy of the Government

During my meetings with the politicians from the different political parties, I raised the concerns of the agricultural community that the government is not bringing developments that

suiting the region and paddy cultivation and that the developments implemented by the government were leading to environmental degradation. Politicians from both UDF and LDF argued that there is no basis for the agricultural community's criticisms.

Rahul is a politician from the CPI (M) I met in Ramankari. I met him in 2018 when the LDF was in power. He asked, 'How can the inhabitants say that the government is doing nothing for the region? Just compare how Kuttanad was fifty years back and how it is now. All these developments you see here, like roads, bridges, bus services, water pipes, etc. are brought by the government.' Here, it must be noted that when he refers to a fifty year period it encompasses both LDF and UDF rule. According to him, people only know to find faults. He pointed out to me that the *Thozhilurappu* and *Kudumbasree* programmes were working successfully and contributed in the economic and social development of the inhabitants.

In the opinion of twenty-two of my politician informants from INC, Kerala Congress, CPI and CPI (M) whom I met in Kavalam, Moncompu, Champakulam, Thakazhi, Mampuzhakari and Mithrakari, when we look at the agricultural development initiatives it can be seen that it is the government that is more interested in paddy cultivation than the agricultural community. I met these politicians on different occasions. While discussing same topics, they had similar views. When they referred to 'government', they were referring to their respective governments. According to Biju, a politician from the CPI (M) in Champakulam who was one among them, 'It is the agricultural community that is losing interest and leaving the occupation, putting all the blame on the government. The government is bringing all kinds of programmes and laws, including conservation laws to make the agricultural community stick to the occupation.' I met him in 2016 after the LDF came to power and before they amended the 2008 conservation law.

I met Sinat, a politician from the Kerala Congress in Nedumudi when he visited my relative's house to distribute a pamphlet regarding a political gathering in the village. I met him when the LDF was in power. While talking about the opposition of the agricultural community he said, "There is a fear among the agricultural community that (infrastructural) 'development' means destruction of paddy cultivation and the environment. There is no point in that fear. Agriculture has always been given importance – right from the creation of the region and even now." When we look at history, the statement of Sinat appears factual. Even though the large-scale land reclamations for paddy cultivation in the early 19th century was a private enterprise, the Travancore Government fully encouraged and supported the endeavour. The accounts of several other politicians from other political parties also supported Sinat's statement. Vivek was another politician from Nedumudi who belonged to the CPI (M). He said that almost all the

major interventions for 'development' initiated by the government were either for bringing more land under the rice crop or for improving the yield of the existing paddy fields. He articulated that over the past several decades, the State Government had initiated and implemented several intensive and extensive measures to increase domestic rice production. I met him when the LDF was in power and when he was referring to 'the government' he was referring to the LDF Government even though the UDF has also been doing the similar development activities.

My politician informants from the different political parties in the region whom I met on several occasions listed quite a number of agricultural development programmes and initiatives undertaken in Kuttanad by their respective governments in order to counter the agricultural community's criticisms of their governments. The developments included the Intensive Agricultural District Programme of 1960-61 brought by the Praja Socialist Party and Indian National Congress Government; the Intensive Paddy Development Programme (Package Programme) of 1971-72 brought by the CPI Government; the Operational Research Project in Integrated Rice Pest Control implemented from 1975 to 1995 during the governments of CPI, INC and CPI (M); the Group Farming Programme of 1989-90 brought by the CPI (M) Government and the Integrated Programme for Rice Development of 1994-95 brought by the INC Government like Intensive Paddy Development Units' Scheme, High-Yielding Varieties Programme, Multiple Cropping Projects, Small Farmers Development Agency Schemes, Kuttanad Development Project and Integrated Agriculture Area Programme.

Vinu, also a politician I met from Nedumudi who belong to CPI spoke about the setting up of the Rice Research Centres, Kuttanad Development Board and an Agricultural University to develop paddy cultivation. He also pointed out that almost all the major and medium irrigation projects were to facilitate extensive and intensive paddy cultivation. Manoj, a politician from Chennankari who belonged to the CPI (M) pointed out that large numbers of research institutions and soil testing laboratories were also set up in the major rice producing areas of the State. He also noted that the wages of the agricultural labourers have also been increased by the government for the betterment of the labourers. In this way, the politicians, regardless of political parties presented the development initiatives of their respective governments related to agricultural development in the region countering the criticisms made by the agricultural community.

Even though, it is true that the government appears to have taken great efforts for the agricultural development of the region, I got the impression during my fieldwork that many of

what remains on paper is different from ground realities, which also points at misgovernment. The calculation of the cost of production and the quoting of the price of paddy; the starting of paddy procurement schemes, pensions and insurances but the delays connected with the release of money; the laws formulated for waste management without any measures being taken to manage the garbage; the formulation of the environment conservation laws and increased episodes of illegal land reclamation; etc., which I have mentioned in the previous chapters are examples of schemes made but not implemented properly. These schemes give the impression that the government has a solution for every problem in the region but in reality, things are different. In other words, these could be considered as schemes made to please the agricultural community and to create an impression that the government is supporting agriculture.

Moreover, the double stand of the government was clearly obvious in the accounts of many of my politician informants. While politicians like Sinat, Vivek, Vinu and Manoj told me about the efforts taken by their respective governments for the development of agriculture, another section of my politician informants, regardless of political parties told me that ‘development’ must be made broad and it will not happen if importance is only given to agriculture. I met Pratheesh, a politician from the INC during a marriage function in one of my agricultural community informant’s house in Champakulam. I met him when the LDF was in power but he was referring to the developments brought by the UDF. Pratheesh said, ‘The government brings developments by keeping an eye on the national and international trends in economic development. Development of a region into an IT park will bring development at a very fast rate, incredible to the inhabitants of this region. Look at the magic IT parks brought in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai and Mumbai. It will provide ample employment opportunities to all the educated, unemployed youngsters in the region. It will also solve the problem of migration. When the UDF was in power, it was making all efforts in this direction.’

Some other politicians I met in Champakulam, Ramankari and Moncompu who were also from the INC told me that it was only with the building of hypermarkets, malls, hotels, resorts, airports, etc. can development be possible in Kuttanad. However, all these INC politician informants often neutralized their comments by stating that development of Kuttanad, including agricultural development was their first and foremost objective. It clearly pinpoints their approach to appease both the agricultural community and the non-agricultural community and the capitalist entrepreneurs. The majority of them grumbled that because of the resistance and non-cooperation of the inhabitants, particularly the agricultural community, it was difficult for them to ‘develop’ Kuttanad in a better and faster way. Thus, I comprehended the double stand

and perspectives of both the UDF and the LDF. This is further apparent in matters related with environment conservation.

Madhu is a politician from Nedumudi belonging to the CPI (M). I met him in one of my visits to the Kuttanad Village Office in 2016 after the LDF came to power. He said, 'The government is criticized for anti-environmental developments and actions. It was to stop illegal new land reclamations that the government brought the conservation laws. If it was an anti-environmental government, would the government have taken the initiative for such an action?' He was referring to the LDF when he mentioned 'the government'. I met him before the LDF government brought the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act in 2018, favouring land reclamations. I came across a number of articles and studies exposing the LDF government's actions against illegal land reclamations indicating their pro-environmental approach. Murali (2009) wrote about the former CPI (M) Chief Minister of Kerala, V.S Achuthanandan, who tried to forcefully take back illegally encroached properties in the different parts of Kerala. The retrieved properties were distributed to the labourers. It was an action against corruption - both corrupt people and officers. However, the endeavour was not successful as the officers who took charge later were not eager in their duties. V.S is quoted in the article as saying, 'IT and industrial developments are welcome as long as it is not a danger to agriculture. Tourism business should be done without adversely affecting the environment.' This article and the approach of the CPI (M) Government under V.S clearly reveals the pro-environmental policies of the LDF Government.

Similarly, Ganesh (2011) wrote how V.S. Sunil Kumar, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the CPI acted against the illegal filling up of 4.85 hectares of paddy fields by real-estate lobby in the *kol* fields in Thrissur area. The MLA made the reclaimers bring back those filled up paddy fields to cultivable state and used the earth that was used for filling up the fields for the repair of the roads. Moreover, paddy was successfully cultivated in those saved paddy fields. The Revenue Division Officer who gave permission to fill up the paddy field was suspended. The MLA is stated to have said that he was showing what a people's representative could do against illegal land reclamations. These two articles reveals the anti-land reclamation and pro-environment stand of the LDF.

However, together with these articles, I also came across articles and reports showing the LDF Government supporting illegal land reclamations and encroachments. Gopakumar (1997) wrote about an incident where the Communist Government supported new land reclamations in Alappuzha. Likewise, Sekhar and Jayadev (2003: 470) also wrote about the Communist

Government's controversial move to lease out a 17km stretch of State owned land from Valiyazhikkal in Kollam District to Thottappally in Alappuzha District to Kerala Rare Earths and Minerals Limited (KREML), a joint sector company for mineral sand mining, for twenty years. KREML had a Kochi-based private sector company as its majority stakeholder. The coastline of Alappuzha and Kollam is densely populated with fishermen community and is one of the most populated stretches in the State. This land was the means of livelihood for over 30,000 fishermen living there, apart from hundreds of coir workers. The sand mining in the area posed grave environmental as well as livelihood problems. The Valiyazhikkal-Thottappally stretch being a highly erosion prone coastline, the mineral sand coast acted as a sea wall protecting the area from soil erosion and also prevented seawater from flowing into the rice fields in the adjacent Kuttanad area lying below sea level. The authors pointed out that no authentic study was done by the government before deciding to lease the land. This deal was done in spite of the apex governmental agency, namely Centre for Earth Science Studies (CESS) having identified beach sand mining in Keralam as a threat to the sociological and environmental stability.

A recent example of the LDF Government's anti-environmental action is the Shanthivanam case in North Paravur that happened at the time of my fieldwork when the LDF was in power. Shanthivanam, a group of sacred groves and forest spread across nearly two acres of land at Vazhikulangara near Paravur is facing threat of extinction as the Kerala State Electricity Board has started cutting trees in the area for the Cherai-Mannam 110 KV line. Though the owner approached the High Court against cutting of trees and there is widespread protest by environmentalists, the court verdict was in favour of the Board. The Board employees cut a huge pine tree in the compound and started the construction of the tower. Shanthivanam, which is more than 200 years old has three sacred groves, three ponds and a man-made forest. Deccan Chronicle (April 2019) reported that sources in KSEB said that the project cannot be dropped, considering the increasing demand for power in the coastal areas like Munambam where several ice manufacturing companies and fish processing units are situated. These instances clearly point at the anti-environmental stand of the LDF. Hence, I realized that pro-environmental and anti-environmental approaches are taken by both LDF and UDF Governments, supporting both the agricultural community and the non-agricultural community and the capitalist entrepreneurs.

Chatterjee (2007) and Rammohan (2008) have pointed at this shift in the approach of governments, especially of the Communist Party and government. In his article on democratic and economic transformation in India, Chatterjee (2007: 8-10) has noted the shift in the attitude

of governments towards developments and capitalists. He stated that the framework of class dominance got transformed with the changes introduced since the 1990s. The former license regime was dismantled and there is greater entry of foreign capital and foreign consumer goods into the domestic market. The opening up of sectors such as telecommunications, transport, infrastructure, mining, banking, insurance, etc. to private capital has led to a change in the very composition of the capitalist class.

There are now many more entrants into the capitalist class. Now there is much greater confidence among Indian capitalists to make use of the opportunities opened up by global flows of capital, goods and services, including significant exports of capital. The most dramatic event has been the rise of the Indian Information Technology industries. Domestic manufacturing and services have also received a major spurt. According to Chatterjee, this transformation in the framework of class dominance resulted in several political changes. First, there is a distinct ascendancy in the relative power of the corporate capitalist class as compared to the landed elites. Second, the dismantling of the license regime has opened up a new field of competition between State governments to woo capitalist investment, both domestic and foreign. According to Chatterjee (2007: 10), the capitalist class exercises its considerable influence over both the Central and the State Governments. According to him, the dominance of the capitalist class within the State structure as a whole can be inferred from the virtual consensus among all major political parties in the priorities of rapid economic growth given to private investment, both domestic and foreign. He stated that it was striking that even the Left has joined this consensus. According to him, this means that as far as the party system is concerned, it does not matter which particular combination of parties comes to power at the Centre or even in the States, the State support for rapid economic growth is guaranteed to continue.

Showing examples from Chengara in Keralam, Rammohan (2008) also similarly portrayed the changing manner of conduct of the governments observed in recent years. He stated that a curious situation is being created in Keralam, where the proletariat and capitalists have joined to fight the landless dalits. He noted that the relative share of time spent by the high administration of the CPI(M) on discussions with multinationals and information technology (IT) companies, their brokers, realtors and tourism magnates when contrasted with the time spent on negotiations with agitating landless tribal people and Dalits, was a sad index of the government's social and economic priorities. These articles provided an insight into the double attitude and approach of the UDF and the LDF in order to gain power and capital, which was what I observed in my study area also. Corruption and misgovernment took matters to a different level.

Corruption and misgovernment

I have already shown the misgovernment in developments and development projects in Kuttanad in Chapter 4. The cases of illegal land reclamations in spite of conservation laws, defective construction of concrete bunds around paddy fields, Thanneermukkom Bund, Thottappally Spillway, AC Road and other link roads across the region, shortcomings in providing machines, delays in procuring paddy and allocating money, delays in providing pensions and insurances, etc. are few among the examples of misgovernment I have brought up in the previous chapters. Kannan (1979), Venunair (2001), Gopalan (2002), Shankar (2005), Paithalen (2005), Swaminathan (2007), Biminith (2008), Ravivarma (2010), Narendran (2010), Dwivedi (2011), Sreejith (2013), Kumar and Devadas (2016) and Sahadevan (2016) asserts the failure of developments in Kuttanad due to misgovernment. Misgovernment and corruption go hand in hand in Kuttanad and are often the reasons behind failure of development projects as I have already shown in Chapter 4.

It is an eminent truth that corruption are rampant in the governing bodies in Keralam. The New Indian Express (December 2016) reported that according to the data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Keralam has the third highest number of corruption cases in India, the highest being Maharashtra followed by Odisha. As many as 430 graft cases were registered in the State in 2016 while it was 377 in 2015. Of the total 4,439 corruption cases registered in India in 2016, 9.7% were from Keralam. As per the data, only a single person was awarded departmental punishment for corruption in Keralam in 2016. It also reported that pendency for completing the trial of corruption cases is also high in Keralam. News18 (2018) reported that Kerala's Vigilance and Anti-Corruption Bureau (VACB) was conducting inquiries against nine former ministers of the previous UDF Government related with graft cases. A few of the most infamous corruption cases in Keralam has been the Palm Olein Import Scam (1991–92), SNC-Lavalin Kerala Hydroelectric Scandal (1995), the Kerala Solar Panel Scam (2013) and the Bar Bribery Case (2014), which involved both UDF and LDF politicians and governments. Two of the very infamous corruption cases happened in Kuttanad region itself, that is, the former minister Thomas Chandy's Land Grabbing Case (2017) and the Agricultural Loan Fraud Case of Thomas Peelianickal (2018). Even though a number of corruption cases like these received wide attention, the innumerable other occurrences of corruption happening in the various parts of the State seldom became public or broadcasted. The numerous instances of illegal land reclamations, sand mining, lime shell collection, etc. occurring in and around Kuttanad itself are examples.

From my interactions with the inhabitants, I came across several testimonies of corruption in the region. Madhavan, a cultivator was cheerful when he told me that he paid some amount to the local politicians to get a road to his house. I have already shown in Chapter 3 that a road near or to a house has great importance in Kuttanad. The value of his property in the real-estate market tripled after the road came. Marriage alliances for his children also increased. Now there is great potential and scope for starting new economic ventures in his property. He considered himself fortunate, and was proud of the promising future. This was the case with several others I met, who had bribed to get roads to their houses. This was the case with illegal land reclamations also, which I have already written about in Chapter 3. All of these shed light on corruption involved to transform the physical landscape of the region by the people and the government. The primary reason behind corruption is social, economic and political benefit be it the people or the government. Hence, the empirical data here exposed the relation between corruption, misgovernment, developments and the social system in Kuttanad.

Developments and Environmental Degradation

From the empirical data I collected from Kuttanad, I comprehended that the apparent aim of the government, irrespective of political fronts, is social development. But the underlying motive is to acquire or retain power and capital. For the last two decades, the government has been focusing on the development of the physical landscape of the region in the name of social development. Kuttanad, being primarily an agricultural region and the majority of the voters being those engaged in agriculture, they have to pacify the agricultural community who oppose non-agricultural developments, to attain their parallel goal of capital accumulation. Together with the objective of serving the inhabitants, by bringing roads and other infrastructural developments, the government is actually paving the way for capitalist development. The ‘service’ propaganda helps to get votes in order to acquire and retain power and infrastructural development at the same time, attracts capitalist investments to enhance capital. Hence, the development perspectives of the government and the projects that followed with it were aimed at acquiring power and capital. If the physical landscapes of Kuttanad are transformed by the inhabitants to bring changes in the social stratification, it is done by the government for power and capital.

This chapter sheds light at the assertions made by Scott (1998) and Harvey (2003). It indicates the meeting of the capitalist lifeworld and the local lifeworld as expounded by Brosius (1999), Biersack (2006) and Tsing (2015). Even though the meeting of lifeworlds sheds light at the analysis made by Taussig (1977), Tsing (2005), Sahlins (2000) and Appadurai (2000a), the result of this fusion remains ambiguous. It points at what Ingold (2000) stated about the

commodification of the environment and sheds lights at the other dimensions of infrastructures than as mere physical structures as expounded by Pfaffenberger (1988) and Larkin (2013).

Even if the developments transforming the region are resisted by the agricultural community, I realized that the wind of change brought by the consumer culture in Keralam is influencing them as well, drawing them also into the trap of capitalism. Moreover, they all are also part of the social struggle to rise up in the new class hierarchy. Thus, the development perspectives of the government directly and indirectly suits and mirrors the interests of the inhabitants. Hence, I realized that ‘development’ is used by both the people and the government to exploit the natural resources in Kuttanad to make changes in the social stratification, to gain power and to enhance capital. However, the development perspectives of both the people and the government are adversely affecting the environment in Kuttanad and its inhabitants as I have already shown in Chapters 3 and 4.

Conclusion

Chapter 10 describes the outlook of the government regarding the development of Kuttanad region. It is traced mainly through the accounts of the politicians belonging to different political parties in the region. By disclosing the contest over natural resources in Kuttanad, Chapters 9 and 10 of Part III exposes the different perspectives of the people and the government and how they use ‘development’ as a means to exploit the natural resources in Kuttanad for social mobility and development. The ‘developments’ that emerge from their perceptions are seen to bring environmental imbalance not only in Kuttanad, but in Keralam as a whole. This brings an end to my ethnography chapters. Chapter 11 that follows is an analysis of the empirical data provided in Parts I, II and III, using the theories presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 11

Concluding Remarks

Implications of the Making and Unmaking of Kuttanad

Chapter 11 presents the major outcomes derived from the present research. Applying the theories raised in Chapter 2, this chapter will analyze the empirical materials from Kuttanad illustrated in Parts I, II and III. By exposing the link between social stratifications, development and environment, this chapter summarizes the contributions of this thesis. The thesis exposes the intricate connection between the physical and social landscapes in Kuttanad. The landscapes of Kuttanad is a reservoir of the inhabitants' history, memories and sentiments, which are deeply connected to the caste system. People from different castes and communities hold different meanings and connections to the region. Paddy fields occupy a central position in the region. The creation of paddy fields by the inhabitants themselves through land reclamation processes in the 1800s and the social formation that ensued connects them differently to the landscapes. While the *Namboodirimar*, Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians who were the former landlords, try to relate to the landscape to espouse their superior ancestry, *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians who were the former labourers, try to sever their associations to particular landscapes like the paddy fields and the coconut gardens that tie them to their low caste identities. Even though Jeffrey (1976), Osella and Osella (2000), Mohan (2015) and Gallo (2017) do not explicitly write about the different ways the different castes related to the different landscapes, it is possible to infer how the different castes and communities related to the landscapes from their writings, as shown in Chapter 2.

The paddy field holds dark memories for the low castes and communities. It is evident in their narrations related with human sacrifices and the hardships their forefathers experienced in their life associated with paddy cultivation in the region, presented in Chapter 5. When the high castes and communities recall human sacrifices and the keeping of slaves and attached labourers as evidences of their proud landlord and high caste ancestry, the low castes and communities recollect them as painful experiences of exploitation related with the caste system. The old caste structure is deeply embedded in the geography and society of Kuttanad. These memories related with the caste system emanating from the landscapes in the region are influencing the identities of inhabitants and their attempts to reshape their identities in contemporary times. The way the inhabitants in Kuttanad relate to its physical landscapes is reminiscent of what Rodman (1992) showed how places can be rich in meanings and how the same place can be sensed differently by different persons. Joniak-Luthi's (2015) assertion that a place must be understood as multiple

and plural is also relevant here. Feld and Basso's (1996) analysis of how places are sensed differently by different people and the multiple ways places are tied to identities are also important in the analysis of this context. The empirical data presented in this thesis sheds light at what Rodman (1992), Feld and Basso (1996) and Joniak-Luthi (2015) showed how places are socially constructed and how places represent people, and people embody places and its role in identity formations.

The important role played by paddy cultivation in the life of the inhabitants is increasingly decreasing with the changing social, economic and political developments in Kuttanad and Keralam, which is related to wider national and international developments. The winds of change observed in Kuttanad, and the way it is differently shaping the identities of the inhabitants is similar to how Hegel (1997) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997) wrote about the changed conditions following global transformations and the new ways landscapes form identities. Migration to places outside Kuttanad and its consequences presented in the thesis is a good example that exposes this situation. It depicts how familiar geographies are uprooted from their original territorial sites and attached to new locations and its influence in identity formations. The empirical data presented in Chapters 3, 4, 6, 9 and 10 shows how the changes that have come about as a result of wider social, economic and political dynamics influence and affect the way the people relate to the landscapes. The tendencies of commodification of land observed nowadays in Kuttanad could be considered as a result of this change and can be related to the assertions made by Tuan (1975) and Ingold (2000).

The change in landlord-labourer relationships with the coming of socio-religious reform movements, education, the cash economy, the rise and spread of communism and all the changes that came up in post-independent period have its impact on the traditional society in Kuttanad as shown in Chapters 5 and 7. Migration, remittances, the new economic policies and the rise of consumer culture are paving the way for the emergence of a society based on class and individualization as depicted in Chapter 8. If the location of a person in the traditional hierarchy is based on status linked to birth and values, his/her position in the class hierarchy is supposedly based on the possession of political and economic power. If the former is based on ascribed status, the latter is ostensibly based on achieved status. It is possible to consider this context in the light of the analytical framework of class analysis proposed by Kocka (1980). When it comes to Kuttanad, it is possible to identify the formation of economic classes. There are clear patterns of material possession and accumulation by people belonging to different castes and communities as shown in the thesis. Migration and remittances have played an important part in the formation of the economic classes in Kuttanad. The gap between the rich

and the poor are increasing. As shown in Chapters 7 and 8, it is possible to see glaring differences in the material wealth of people even in the same neighbourhood and within families. The differences in the material condition of people in the Latin Catholic, Ezhava, Syrian Christian and Pulaya cases I discussed in Chapter 8 are clear examples that expose the increasing material inequality. Newly constructed big concrete houses, sprouting of commercial buildings, increasing number of private vehicles, possession of household appliances - together with the exclusion of substantial groups from the new consumerism - indicates the growth and existence of the economic classes.

Whether the classconsciousness, which has developed among the economic classes is enough for us to categorize them as social classes, is unclear. In many ways, they remain mostly as strata of persons who accumulate different levels of economic wealth and power. Apart from striving for upward mobility on a personal and familial basis, there seems to be no social cohesion among them and little that binds them together to emerge as a single force. It could be the caste distinctions between people and their caste consciousness that are obstructing the formation of classconsciousness. This makes the question of social class ambiguous in the Kuttanad setting.

When it comes to question of the political classes, Communism was an important political movement in Kuttanad. However, I see it more as a caste based movement and a modernization movement for the different castes. As I understand, Communism was looked upon by the different castes and communities as a means to overcome the different detrimental conditions in which they were situated. From the accounts of Tharamangalam (1981), Cherian (1986), George (1992) and Kamalasanan (1993), it could be inferred that Communism unified the low castes and communities like the Pulaya caste to oppose the exploitations by the high caste/community landlords. It gave them courage and confidence to fight for their rights that could help them to attain social mobility. At the same time, from the accounts of Jeffrey (1976) and Gallo (2017), it could be deduced that it was looked upon as a modernizing force by the young *Nayanmar* and *Namboodirimar* who wanted to reform the outdated traditions and backwardness of their respective castes. Hence, even though Communism was a powerful political movement, which shows aspects of the formation of a political class, it was considered mostly as a means by the different castes and communities to uplift and modernize themselves. The degree to which political classes emerge as a reality in Kuttanad, is therefore unclear.

Unlike the traditional caste society, as the divisions are vague and ambiguous in the emerging class society, it is looked upon as an opportunity by the low castes and communities to get rid

of their pollution and raise their power and status in the social hierarchy. The empirical data from Kuttanad shows that there are mainly two motives driving the low castes and communities towards social mobility. One is the material rewards that follow the acquisition of economic and political power. They want to have money, valuable possessions, property, big houses, high occupational positions, and so on. The second motive is related with the caste system and it is to get rid of their pollution in order to achieve a high status. The analysis of the social and political characteristics of goods made by Douglas and Isherwood (2002) and Appadurai (1988b) is relevant in understanding this context, which sheds light at the social and political motives behind the use of material goods by the people. There is an obvious link between the acquisition of material wealth and social mobility projects in my study area. What Nandy (2002) wrote about consumerism is appropriate in the analysis here. He pointed out that the difference between the rich and the poor is becoming less cultural and more economic. He noted that in much of the world now, larger and larger proportions of the poor have everything the rich have, only they have its fourth-rate, down-market versions. This condition created by social mobility struggles is very much observed in my study area. However, his argument that the traditional lifestyles of the rich and the poor protected the poor from destitution and loss of dignity is a sheer negligence of the realities in which the poor low castes and communities lived in the past. His romantic view of the past, fail to notice the deplorable conditions in which the poor lived. They were locked in a caste driven reality where they were not allowed to do anything and where they lost all their dignity and self-worth. In this context, as the new class society is based on new principles, the high castes and communities are also drawn into the competition for acquiring economic and political power along with the low castes and communities as shown in Chapters 7 and 8.

Now the question is to what degree does the caste position influence and determine the class position? The data collected from Kuttanad shows that the high castes and communities are in a more advantageous position than the low castes and communities to utilize the resources related with the caste system to acquire benefits in the class society. For example, the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians are to some degree able to use their high caste position to acquire high positions in the class society than the *Ezhavanmar*, *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians. This is obvious when it comes to education, employment, migrations, remittances, etc. as shown in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9. However, the case of the *Namboodirimar* is different and shows an opposite tendency. While the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians make use of the caste system to gain benefits in the class society, the *Namboodirimar* are not able to accomplish as much as the others. While the Brahmins in other States and the Tamil Brahmins in Keralam have been clever in utilizing the

opportunities brought by postcolonial modernity to their advantage, the *Namboodirimar* have been most often shying away. Hence, it is possible to see castes and communities placed lower than the *Namboodirimar* in the caste hierarchy like the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar*, Syrian Christians and even many *Ezhavanmar* and some *Pulayanmar* and low caste converted Christians possessing more economic and political power in the class society in varying degrees. This takes the discussion to the question of status and power.

Unlike the low castes and communities, the high castes and communities have a high status based on birth in the caste hierarchy. It has been observed that high castes and communities most often retain a high status in society even if their position in the class hierarchy is low. Even if a high caste/community person has lost his/her economic power, he/she possesses an inherent status that makes him/her still respected. Even if the *Namboodirimar* do not possess much economic and political power, they still hold a high status due to the continuing influence of the caste system. The same applies to a lesser degree to the Tamil *Brahmananmar*, *Nayanmar* and Syrian Christians. The data from Kuttanad shows that in spite of all efforts, no matter how much economic and political power they achieve, the low castes and communities are not able to acquire the status, which the high castes and communities possess. There is some authority, which status, that is linked to the notions of purity and pollution holds that no political or economic power can do away with, thereby making (political and economic) power partly subordinate to status similar to Dumont's (1980) thesis of encompassment.

Also, no matter how hard the low castes and communities strive for purity, the high castes and communities continue to treat them as impure and low as they assert that purity status is ascribed through birth and is not an achieved status. Therefore, they are not able to get rid of their low caste identity and the pollution connected with it. This is in contrast to what Srinivas (2009) and Gupta (2004 and 2005) wrote about the possibilities of upward social mobility in the caste system in modern India. Emphasizing the concept of Sanskritization and mentioning the post-colonial developments, he stated that upward mobility and changes in the castes system is possible. Exhibiting the post-independent political and economic transformations in India, Gupta (2004 and 2005) shed light at the changes that have come in the caste system and the possibilities of social mobility in contemporary times. The empirical data from Kuttanad shows that regardless of economic and political power, it is not fully possible to get rid of pollution, and achieve a high status. This makes the modern society partly a reproduction of the traditional hierarchy with the prejudices related with the caste system continuing in new forms, much in the direction of the assertion made by Dumont (1980) regarding the continuation of the caste system. In a way, it could be inferred that this was what Dirks (2001) was also implicitly

showing. Even though, he was criticizing Dumont (1980) and showing the colonial influence in shaping the modern caste system, he is also in fact showing the continuation of the caste system in modern times. Status based on purity-pollution distinctions is governing the body and conduct of people, making them at some level, accept their own subordination.

In spite of the awareness of their subordinate position, the low castes and communities continue to strive for purity and status in the modern society based on class and individualization using the opportunities brought before them by modern capitalist developments. I noticed that the contest for upward social mobility is now apparent more between persons, no matter to which caste or community he/she belonged than between castes and communities as presented in Chapter 8. I observed contest for mobility between persons within same castes and communities and between persons belonging to different castes and communities. This sheds light at the analysis made by Beck (1992) on individualization. Tendencies of a society based on individualization is emerging in Kuttanad even though it has not become prominent. People are increasingly becoming centers of their own life - controlling their own wealth, living space, social relationships and planning their own education, occupation, place of residence and so on. In a way, it could be said that they are choosing their own, new identity.

It is possible to see circumstances paving the way for the emergence of individualization in my study area. The independence acquired by a person through education, new occupations, own salary and wealth, migrations, etc. is helping him/her to detach from traditional patterns and arrangements. They do not have to follow their traditional occupations anymore, they can build houses wherever they want and according to their own likes, they can possess whatever they can afford and so on. At the same time, as Beck pointed out, when people detach themselves from the control of the traditional society, they find themselves being controlled by economic and political institutions making them dependent on education, social policies, regulations, the market and its economic cycles, product offers, consumption, fashion and so on. The recent cultural phenomenon of developments and engineering trends in Kuttanad that does not fit the environment or take the environment into account can be considered as a result of the market driven modern developments that has become symbols of modernity. This is similar to what Beck wrote about generically designed housing, furnishings, articles of daily use and opinions, habits, attitudes and lifestyles launched and adopted through the mass media.

Moreover, through individualization, the people are not escaping from competitions and inequalities. On the contrary, they are experiencing it in renewed forms. The competitions I observed between persons belonging to same castes and communities and even within families

can be related to these aspects of individualization. The fact that persons shape their own biography makes them responsible for their own decisions. The reason for comparison of successes and failures of people and the resultant feelings of personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses witnessed in my study area could be related to Beck's analysis.

The question is to what degree has individualization taken its hold in the Kuttanad society. To what extent has detraditionalization occurred as stated by Beck? Empirical data shows that Kuttanad is still a society based on caste, and caste still has a great influence on the people. Even though an economic class similar to the analysis made by Kocka (1986) is prevailing, it is not clear to what extent the persons in the material class consider themselves as a social or political class. In such a context, individualization is rearing its head in a caste-class based society where the divisions are blurred. Moreover, it has been found that the social mobility project is encompassed within the caste system. In such a situation, processes of individualization is not really depriving the persons of their social identity as Beck claims. A person is not losing his/her caste nor is he/she able to change his/her position in the caste hierarchy no matter how much economic and political power he/she acquires. Hence, I found that caste, class and individualization exist side-by-side in Kuttanad making it impossible to label the society as any one of them making the society an amalgam of caste, class and individualization.

The alterations made on the physical landscapes presented in Chapters 3 and 4, mirror the changes happening in the society in Kuttanad. The transformation of Kuttanad through land reclamations sheds light on the moulding and remoulding of a region to suit bigger interests. Both the people and the government are seen restructuring the landscapes to suit their social, economic and political interests. If the intention of the government is to acquire power and capital, the drive of the people is partly social mobility. Both uses capitalist developments to realize their different goals. The geographical transformation and the changes in the land utilization patterns thus exposes both the spatial reorganization of the geography of the region with the expansion of modern capitalist development endeavours as well as the social mobility projects of the different castes and communities that inhabit the region. This drive of the people and the government is visible in the various infrastructural, commercial and habitational constructions built in the region as shown in Chapters 3 and 4.

Even though the ultimate objective of the government, irrespective of political parties, apparently seems to be social development, its support for capitalist developments and its

parallel goals of acquiring power and capital are visible in the various development policies and schemes brought to transform the landscapes of Kuttanad. Together with the objective of serving the inhabitants, by bringing roads and other infrastructural developments, the government is actually paving the way for capitalist development. The 'service' propaganda helps to get votes in order to acquire and retain power, and infrastructural development at the same time, attracts capitalist investments to enhance capital. However, these development agendas of the government in a way reflects and concurs with the interests and social mobility projects of the people. The government follows a double stand appeasing both the agricultural community who oppose non-agricultural developments, and the non-agricultural community who support non-agricultural developments as can be deduced from Chapters 3, 4, 9 and 10. Even though the government formulates environment conservation laws preventing land reclamations, instances of the government supporting developments that require the filling up of paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands are visible in my study area. The government is also seen making adequate amendments to the environment conservation laws in order to pave the way for capitalist developments as is visible in the case of the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act of 2018 presented in Chapter 3. Even though the government has ample schemes for the development of paddy cultivation, the increasing importance given to commercial crops over food crops in Keralam is obvious as shown in Chapter 3. Hence, the development projects of the government that are transforming the landscapes of Kuttanad are on the one hand in line with the social mobility projects of the people and on the other hand aimed at acquiring power and capital.

In their rush for power and capital, the government is not making proper study of the geography of Kuttanad before implementing their promised developments as can be inferred from Chapters 3, 4, 9 and 10. A thorough knowledge of the region is essential while planning developments because of the differences in the geographical features within the region. The inhabitants, especially the agricultural community who knows the land are neglected from development planning. The lack of local knowledge and the exclusion of inhabitants from development planning are in turn badly affecting the planning processes and resulting in the implementation of developments that are adversely affecting the environment and the people. The empirical data collected from Kuttanad shows that there are not many developments brought by the government that suit the environment in the region. The failure of the construction of concrete bunds and dykes, Thottappally Spillway, Thanneermukkom Bund, AC Road and other roads, the Green Revolution and related problems and the flawed land reclamations portrayed in Chapters 3 and 4 are all examples. They are instances and illustrations of decontextualized constructions undertaken by the government in the region. The intensification of floods, the

stagnation of water and the resultant pollution, spread of waterweeds and its immobility, scarcity of drinking water and the problems faced by the fishing and coconut industries presented in Chapter 4 are results of the implementation of development projects without proper local knowledge of the geography of the region.

The development projects of the government transforming the geography of Kuttanad goes parallel to the social mobility projects of the people, which also requires the transformation of the landscapes. However, these transformations in the form of land reclamations, buildings and constructions are done so aggressively by both the people and the government, neglecting the fragile nature of the wetlands lying below sea level as can be inferred from Chapters 3, 4 and 9. Paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands are filled up to fit in concrete constructions that are too heavy for the delicate ecology of the region. The construction of roads, commercial buildings and houses that do not fit the ecology of the region exposes the modernist development perspectives that are detached from local contexts. Many of the developments are in addition, also increasing the pollution. The development of the tourism industry depicted in Chapter 9 is an example. These exaggerated development undertakings, plans and constructions in Kuttanad could be seen as the way the people respond to the modern developments that have come up in Keralam in a similar way as shown by Tsing (1993) in her study of the Meratus Dayaks in Indonesia. The disregard of the environment in their quest for status, power and capital is visible in the numerous cases of corruption and illegal land reclamations mentioned in the thesis involving both the people and the government. Corruption made development worse in Kuttanad resulting in projects adversely affecting the region. Both government and people are engaged in activities of corruption to suit their interests as shown in Chapters 3, 4, 6, 9 and 10. The cases of corruption and misgovernment affirms the possible reason why development projects in Kuttanad fail or remains incomplete.

The desire for social mobility easily pushes the people into the trap set by the market economy and capitalism through consumer culture making them engage in activities adversely affecting the region as shown in Chapters 3, 8 and 9. They end up filling up paddy fields, waterbodies and wetlands and constructing buildings in modern capitalist designs. They wish for eradicating the environment conservation laws so that they can make use of the wetland for capitalist developments that enables them upward social mobility. Driven by modern capitalism, the decontextualized constructions and alternations made on the landscapes in Kuttanad by both the people and the government is reminiscent of what Scott (1998) wrote about the high modernist developments undertaken by the State, disregarding local knowledge. The geographical expansion and spatial reorganization observed in Kuttanad is an indication of the

expansion of capitalism similar to how Harvey (2003) explicated. It clearly exposes the entanglement of market driven capitalist development and social mobility projects, shedding light at the other dimensions of infrastructures than as mere physical structures as expounded by Pfaffenberger (1988) and Larkin (2013).

Cultivation of paddy continues in the midst of attempts towards social mobility and capitalist developments as shown in Chapters 5 and 6. The post-independent capitalist developments and the change in the attitude of people towards paddy cultivation are creating challenges for the paddy cultivators to cultivate paddy, thereby increasing their risks and losses in cultivation as shown in Chapter 6. Challenges brought by labour shortage, education, unemployment, migration and mechanization exposes the wider social, economic and political dynamism in Keralam. However, I observed that with increasing mechanization and absentee landlordism by leasing out paddy fields to cultivators, the nature of paddy cultivation is gradually changing and paddy cultivation is very gradually shedding its caste nature. This could be a reason why more people belonging to both high and low castes/communities were seen engaging in manual labourer in their own fields to reduce the cost of production at the time of my fieldwork. However, the rich high and low castes/communities were never seen engaging in manual labour and never as hired labourers, which exposes that the caste nature of paddy cultivation still prevails.

However, in spite of all social, economic and political changes, paddy still continues to be cultivated by bringing people belonging to the various social strata together in different ways as shown in Chapters 5 and 6. The risk involved in the process of cultivating paddy below sea level creates a distinct unity among the paddy cultivators as they strive together for a good harvest. Paddy cultivation has never been a one-man show and it still remains so even today in the background of rising trends of individualization. How long will paddy cultivation continue like this? The answer remains uncertain. Maybe the modern developments will gradually swallow up all the paddy fields as it was happening at the time of my fieldwork or maybe paddy cultivation will attain a new nature by shedding its caste nature and thereby receiving attention and importance. The agricultural community who resists non-agricultural developments and the transformation of Kuttanad are also part of the social struggle for mobility. In spite of all their conservation efforts and achievements in preserving the paddy fields and the wetlands in Kuttanad, portrayed in Chapter 9, they are also getting influenced by the social, economic, political and cultural changes happening around them. Hence, the wind of change brought by the market economy and the consumer culture in Keralam is influencing them as well, drawing them towards capitalism.

It is the meeting of two lifeworlds as pointed out by Brosius (1999), Biersack (2006) and Tsing (2015), that is visible here. Taussig (1977), Sahlins (2000), Appadurai (2000a) and Tsing (2005) sheds light at the outcome of this rendezvous. Taussig (1977) stated that the interaction between two lifeworlds does not result in the extinction of one lifeworld. Tsing (2005) argued that cultural diversity is not banished from interconnections. According to Sahlins (2000), in any local sector of the global system, the transformation assumes the dual appearance of assimilation and differentiation. Appadurai (2000a) argued that as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way. Hence more than the world getting homogenized, it is the creation of new cultural forms that are being created. The outcome of the meeting of the capitalist lifeworld and the local lifeworld based in caste system in Kuttanad remains ambiguous.

The impact of ecological imbalances created as a result of the alterations made on the physical landscapes by both the people and the government is felt not just in Kuttanad but in Keralam as a whole. The reduction in the area under paddy, waterbodies and wetlands and the resultant decline in the production of paddy and the environmental problems experienced in the region, illustrated in Chapters 3 and 4, exposes people having to bear the impact and adjust to the consequences of their own actions. It also sheds light on the quandary into which people subjected to such development endeavours reach and their helplessness in having to adjust with the predicament. The environment conservation laws described in Chapter 3 are positive signs of the consciousness of the people and the government to take care of the environment. However, corruption and aspirations for power and status makes them overlook such cognizance in line with the observation Giddens (2009) made regarding global climatic changes that even though most of the public accept that global warming is a major threat; yet only a few are willing to alter their lives in any significant way. This situation points at the necessity for a change in the development perspectives of the people and the government towards a more sustainable one. This sheds light at Heidegger (1977), Giddens (1996 and 2009), Lovelock (2000), Carson (1962), and Chakrabarty (2009 and 2015) who emphasized the need to surpass differences and disputes to a level where life on earth is valued and revered, to make life on this planet sustainable.

If paddy fields were the arena where pollution related with caste system transpired in the past, it is possible to infer from the empirical data presented in the thesis that pollution has taken new forms in contemporary Kuttanad. Kuttanad exposes two forms of pollution – the pollution related with the caste system and the pollution related with the environment. In spite of these

two concepts being different – one belonging to the ecological realm and the other to the religious and cultural realm – it could be inferred that there is an emerging connection between them. The environment in Kuttanad, I saw at the time of my fieldwork was polluted due to the developments that were brought with the anticipation of helping people get out of the religious/cultural pollution connected with the caste system. Hence, pollution is now related with both the social and physical (environmental) domains. It is possible to say that both these pollutions influence the people's relation to the region. Migration, educated unemployment, labour shortage, the preference for leasing out fields and remaining as absentee landlords and so on could be regarded as the efforts of the inhabitants to escape from the pollution connected with both the physical and social landscapes of Kuttanad. It could also be said that the attempts to transform Kuttanad from a rice producing to a non-rice producing tract is also partly related with these two concepts of pollution. It is to erase the old structures of pollution with new structures of purity. However, it is found that when it comes to the caste system, in spite of all efforts to erase the old structures, they still remain deeply embedded in the physical and social landscapes, taking new forms. Hence, the attempts to transform the physical landscapes of Kuttanad using 'development' as a means, did not seem to fulfil its social purpose but was resulting in environmental imbalances and problems that adversely affected the people and the region.

The 2018 floods, presented as an epilogue to this dissertation, submerged all barriers and differences, transforming the entire Kuttanad into a vast spread of water. No walls remained to separate people, religions, castes and communities. Similar to what Chakrabarty (2009:221) stated regarding the human condition in the Anthropocene, when the floods occurred in Kuttanad, there were no lifeboats for the rich and the privileged; everyone faced the consequences of human actions on the environment. It could be stated that Kuttanad represents a miniature version of the global situation. Soon after the floods, discussions to rebuild Kuttanad followed. The 2018 flood was a severe blow to the pending development plans in Kuttanad. It brought an abrupt halt to all 'development' programmes. There were even talks of cancelling the amendment made to the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland (Amendment) Act 2018. Here, I would like to cite Chakrabarty (2009) and Tsing (2005) who asserted – 'We have all stumbled into this and what is needed is to find a way out.' Before any decisions were made, I had to leave my field to complete the writing of my thesis. As discussions and negotiations continued in the background between politicians, entrepreneurs, environmentalists and representatives of the agricultural community, my informants from various streams of life who had been badly affected by the floods, spoke of a bleak and uncertain future. 'Floods washed away everything. Everything has to be started from the beginning. The choice of

development of the region is ours,' said Ramachandran, a landlord-cultivator from Champakulam.⁷⁸ A deep silence haunted the region as I left my field in October 2018.

To sum up, applying the discourses on the relation between environment, development and social stratification, the chapters of this thesis argue that 'development' is used as a means to exploit the natural resources in Kuttanad at incredible proportions by both the people and the government for status, power and capital. In the process of 'development' – both physical and social, the environment is getting neglected resulting in environmental degradation, which is ultimately bringing damage to the people. Hence, my research points at the need to rethink about 'development'

⁷⁸ Ramachandran is a male landlord-cultivator.

Epilogue
Floods 2018

The most drastic flood that hit the entire State of Kerala since 1924 happened in the monsoon of 2018 during my last trip for fieldwork. The flood hit all the fourteen districts in the State but the most afflicted were the districts of Alappuzha, Pathanamthitta, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Idukki, Kozhikode, Malappuram and Wayanad. More than 483 people died in the State and thousands of people were rendered homeless. Over 5,645 relief camps were set up across the State that housed at least 1 million people.

Kuttanad was one of the worst affected regions during the 2018 floods. To the bewilderment of my informants, the monsoon brought two floods – one in July and the second in August. It was the second flood that was the most disastrous and brought untold destruction. Being a region where flooding is an annual occurrence, it was when my informants thought their annual ordeal was over that to their surprise, the flood returned with an increased ferocity in August. Normally, floods happen in Kuttanad due to heavy downpours or high tides from the sea. This time, the fierceness was extreme due to certain other reasons as well. When the heavy monsoon rain increased the water level in the 40 odd dams in Kerala, the shutters of all the dams had to be opened to let out water. The water that gushed from the rivers raised the water level in the Vembanad *Kayal* at a mindboggling speed and flooded the areas in the region within hours. In addition to this, water from the neighbouring flooded areas started flowing to the low-lying Kuttanad. The infrastructural developments blocked the flow of floodwater out into the sea thereby intensifying the flood situation.

The entire administration was alarmed – both the government and the opposition. There was no other way but to order evacuation. But where could the evacuated go? The entire State was under the hazard of floods. With the rising water level, the relief camps had to be shifted many times to more and more elevated areas. Nearly 0.27 million people were evacuated from Kuttanad to relief camps. Countless others took shelter in friends' and relatives' houses still not affected by the catastrophe. Psychologically it was difficult for many of my informants irrespective of caste, community and religion to go to relief camps. Interestingly, it was not caste, community or religion that produced this stigma towards relief camps. Even though one incident of caste related conflict was reported from a camp, surprisingly, people of Kerala stood united sympathizing with and strengthening each other. For most of my informants, it was the thought of staying in camps with hundreds of others with very scant facilities, having

poor sanitation, leaving behind all their belongings to sink in the floods and with thoughts of a very uncertain future hanging over their head that made them reluctant to go to relief camps.

From my observations, I got the impression that the rift in the camps, if any, was more between the rich and the poor than between different castes, communities and religions. However, people had no other way but to end up in relief camps. Several inhabitants refused to move to camps due to the strong belief that water will not enter their houses and several others moved only after water rose until their necks. At several places, water rose up, submerging even the roofs of houses. Outhachan, a landlord from Champakulam said, 'I have seen many floods in Kuttanad in my lifetime. Our house was one of the few in the region where water never entered even once. However, the present flood is beyond everything.'

As evacuation continued, parallel rescue operations had to be performed. Boats and canoes were the only means that could rescue the people. With the 'developments' in the region, people had given up water transportation for road transportation. Many had sold their boats and canoes for buying two-wheelers and four-wheelers. When floods inundated the entire region, only boats and canoes floated on top. But there were not enough canoes and boats to rescue everyone. The fishermen from across the State stepped in with their boats. Even then, it was not enough. Houseboats, now used only for tourism purposes were asked to be used for rescuing people by the authorities. While many voluntarily lent their houseboats, some remained hesitant to give their expensive boats and they had to be threatened of arrest and seizure of their boats by the government, in case of refusal. Even then, soon things went out of the control of the government as the resources under their command were found insufficient to deal the calamity. Thousands living on the banks of narrow rivers and canals remained stranded as the large houseboats could not reach them. Even the small boats that were available were unable to reach several places due to hindrances caused by the floods. Thousands of people remained marooned and stranded with no water to drink, food to eat and with no electricity for more than three or four days at different places. Many of them were small children, pregnant women, and the sick and elderly people who needed medical care. Now, the only way to save them was by air. Hence, the government demanded immediate deployment of the army and the navy to save those in areas where boats could not reach. However, this had other troubles. The navy had only limited helicopters in the beginning and as they were found insufficient, more had to be brought from the Centre. All this was time consuming. However, even though four hundred plus people died across the State, thousands were rescued with the available resources and manpower.

The co-operation and support extended by the people of Keralam to help each other, irrespective of caste, community and religion during the 2018 floods were highly appreciated by the entire country. Thousands of volunteers had signed in from across the State for both rescue operations and for rendering help in the relief camps. Money and varied assistance poured in even from the millions of Keralites working and living abroad, to rebuild and restore their land and people. Keralites at once decided not to celebrate Onam, their harvest festival that came in the middle of the distress. Instead, the money was allotted to the flood effected people.

When Keralam stood united to overcome the crisis, there was a skirmish between the State headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Centre headed by the BJP with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. The relief amount promised by the Centre was disappointing to the State. The estimated loss in the State was at least Rupees 20,000 crores (2,373,190,050 Euro) but the Centre promised only Rupees 600 crores (71,196,992.21 Euro) as immediate relief to Keralam, which had witnessed its worst flood in the century. Several offers of help from countries and organizations abroad to Keralam were also repudiated by the Central Government. For example, the Kerala Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan stated that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offered to give Rupees 700 crores (83,061,651.75 Euro) as assistance to the State. Citing a 2004 decision, the Central Government announced that no State in India is allowed to accept any assistance from a foreign government. Those who slammed Narendra Modi's refusal of foreign funds to flood affected Keralam reminded that the BJP ruled government under Modi in Gujarat had happily sought and accepted financial and material help from all over the world after the January 2001 earthquake that hit the State. Soon after the earthquake hit Gujarat, the then BJP Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee had appealed to the international community to help Gujarat rebuild itself. Millions in financial assistance was received from nations like the US, UK, Canada, China, Germany besides the usual relief agencies like Red Cross and UNICEF sending material help as reported by The Statesman (August 2018). According to most of my informants, it is the unpopularity of BJP in the State that made the Central Government to be reluctant in providing aid. BJP has never won elections in Keralam. All this widened the gulf between the State and the Centre at the time of the floods.

It took several weeks for the water to recede completely in several places and during that time, the people remained in the relief camps. Once the water receded, cleaning operations kicked off. Thousands of civil volunteers, including students, young professionals, ministers, bureaucrats, snake catchers and others stepped in the effort to bring back Keralam to normalcy. The State Government roped in electricians, plumbers and volunteers to help. The Kerala State

Electricity Board roped in engineering students to visit the houses to check wiring and electrical connections. I observed my informants returning home with a bucket, a mug, a broom and a kit with some provisions. They found their houses with sludge and muck nearly up to their knees. As toilets were overflowing and wells got polluted, there were fears of spread of diseases and illnesses. But no such diseases have been reported so far. Doctors, medical students and the health department workers volunteered providing free medical assistance at relief camps and other places. More than 60,000 volunteers from all walks of life descended on Kuttanad to clean up the region. The majority of my informants had lost everything - agricultural land, houses and all their possessions in just a few days time. All of them had to begin from scratch.

Slowly, when life gradually started again, talks and discussions started about the causes of the floods and how Kuttanad/Keralam could be rebuilt. Environment became a major concern in all discussions that followed. According to the statistics available with the Kerala Agriculture Department, the flood ravaged paddy cultivation in 7,316 hectares in Kuttanad. Together with crops, the damage to houses and other infrastructures were also severe. According to my informants, it was the neglect of the government to construct more outer bunds around the paddy fields and their reluctance to strengthen the existing bunds that worsened the situation. Ecologists like Madhav Gadgil said, extensive stone quarrying and mushrooming of high-rises as part of tourism, and illegal forestland acquisition by private parties were the major reasons for the recent floods in the State. The environmentalists in Kuttanad asserted that the increased rate of land reclamations is one of the factors that led to increase in the severity of the floods.

Floods continue to occur in Kuttanad; 2018 floods being a good example. In times of flooding, water flows over all the borders and boundaries, walls and fences that separate people, making divisions and disjuncture disappear. All suffer, irrespective of caste, community and creed. This reminds of what Chakrabarty (2009: 221) stated, 'Unlike in the crisis of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.' Everything then looks like a vast sheet of water. Unity becomes indispensable for survival. Kuttanad seemed like a mini stage to me, depicting the global environment tragedy due to irrational profit-oriented developments. The happenings and experiences in Kuttanad prompt me to assert that developments brought for the well-being of human beings, without regard for the environment, will ultimately bring disaster to the entire humanity. When nature reacts, all will have to suffer the consequences, irrespective of race and nationality. The studies and assertions made by Carson (1962), Giddens (1996 and 2009), Lovelock (2000) and Chakrabarty (2009 and 2015) finds relevance in this context.

Nine months after the 2018 floods, when I contacted some of my informants in Kuttanad from Norway over the phone, they were excited to inform me that the 2018 floods brought immense fertility to the soil and everyone who cultivated paddy after the floods, reaped huge profits. It reminded me of how the floods are a curse and a blessing at the same time. It also exposed the optimism of the agricultural community and their determination to cultivate paddy against all odds. They also brought my attention to an incident that happened after the floods and after I left, which they said has boosted the spirits of the agricultural community. Jose Venganthara, a Syrian Christian landlord-cultivator from Mampuzhakari was able to cultivate 404.686 hectares (1000 acres) of paddy land by taking the land on lease from about 1300 landowners in the Rani and Chithira *Kayalukal* which were the paddy fields reclaimed by Thomas Murickan in 1934. He was able to get a harvest worth Rupees 3 crores (375,103.76 Euro) and the net profit he got was Rupees 80 lakhs (100,028 Euro), which was much above the profit got by those who cultivated on small plots. This was an indication of the need to do paddy cultivation on large areas, rather than on fragmented pieces of land. My informants mentioned that Jose Venganthara achieved this by using only organic manure. This, they said, is a revolution! This is a severe blow to the chemical fertilizer/pesticide companies and an enlightenment to the agricultural community who had thought that it is impossible to cultivate paddy using only organic manure after the Green Revolution. Due to shortage of local agricultural labourers, Jose Venganthara sought the help of migrant labourers from Bengal and Tamilnadu in the endeavour. This incident gave him the name, ‘The Tiger of Kuttanad’ for daring to cultivate paddy on such a vast extent of land, immediately after the 2018 floods. My informants told me that it had also been reported in the *Karshakasree*, a popular Malayalam magazine on agriculture in May 2019. From the tone of the agricultural community, I could sense their joy in the achievement. Even though they told me that reclamation activities have not stopped yet, they seemed rejuvenated and filled with a new hope.

Tables

Table 1. Area under Paddy Cultivation in Kerala (1952-2018)

Year	Area in Million Hectares	Year	Area in Million Hectares
1952-53	0.742	1998-99	0.352
1955-56	0.759	2002-03	0.310
1958-59	0.790	2003-04	0.287
1959-60	0.769	2004-05	0.289
1960-61	0.779	2005-06	0.276
1961-62	0.753	2006-07	0.264
1966-67	0.799	2007-08	0.229
1970-71	0.875	2008-09	0.234
1971-72	0.875	2009-10	0.234
1972-73	0.873	2010-11	0.213
1974-75	0.881	2011-12	0.208
1975-76	0.876	2012-13	0.197
1976-77	0.854	2013-14	0.199
1978-79	0.799	2014-15	0.198
1982-83	0.778	2015-16	0.196
1992-93	0.538	2016-17	0.171
1996-97	0.431	2017-18	0.189

Sources: Government of Kerala (2009-10), (2012-13), (2013), (2014-15), (2015-16), (2016-17), Padmanabhan et.al (2001:5), Menon (1983), The Punja Special Officer (1982)

Table 2. Area under Paddy Cultivation in Kuttanad (1966-2018)

Year	Area in Million Hectares	Year	Area in Million Hectares
1966-67	0.060	2008-09	0.044
1990-91	0.101	2009-10	0.048
1991-92	0.092	2010-11	0.051
1992-93	0.091	2011-12	0.056
1994-95	0.090	2012-13	0.051
1995-96	0.079	2013-14	0.050
1996-97	0.072	2014-15	0.048
1997-98	0.065	2015-16	0.045
1998-99	0.057	2016-17	0.047
1999-2000	0.057	2017-18	0.050
2002-03	0.037		

Sources: M.S Swaminathan (2007:12-13), P.M Thomas (2002), Agricultural Statistics – Government of Kerala (2008-09), (2009-10), (2012-13), (2013-14), (2014-15), (2015-16), (2016-2017), (2017-18).

Table 3. Production of Rice in Kerala (1958-2018)

Year	Production in Million Tonnes	Year	Production in Million Tonnes
1958-59	1.358	2006-07	0.641
1960-61	0.988	2007-08	0.528
1972-73	1.376	2008-09	0.590
1975-76	1.33	2009-10	0.598
1976-77	1.2	2010-11	0.522
1982-83	1.3	2011-12	0.568
1996-97	0.871	2012-13	0.508
1998-99	0.73	2013-14	0.564
2002-03	0.688	2014-15	0.562
2003-04	0.570	2015-16	0.549
2004-05	0.667	2016-17	0.437
2005-06	0.629	2017-18	0.521

Sources: Government of Kerala (2009 – 10), Jayachandran (1979), Padmanabhan et.al (2001:5), Kannan (2000:5-6), Government of Kerala (2012-13), (2013), (2014-15), (2015-16), (2016-17).

Table 4. Production of Rice in Kuttanad (1990-2018)

Year	Production in Million Tonnes	Year	Production in Million Tonnes
1990-91	0.227	2008-09	0.132
1991-92	0.201	2009-10	0.132
1992-93	0.217	2010-11	0.130
1994-95	0.180	2011-12	0.170
1995-96	0.203	2012-13	0.149
1996-97	0.152	2013-14	0.150
1997-98	0.142	2014-15	0.147
1998-99	0.146	2015-16	0.132
1999-2000	0.152	2016-17	0.145
		2017-18	0.146

Sources: PM Thomas (2002), Agricultural Statistics - Government of Kerala (2008-09) (2009-10), (2010-11), (2012-13), (2013-14), (2014-2015), (2015-16), (2016-17), (2017-18).

**Table 5. Cost of Production of Rice of One Cultivator in Kuttanad
(2015-2018 per hectare)**

	Items	Amount (Rs/ha)		
		2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
1.	Land preparation	9000	7500	8750
2.	Pumping, Dewatering	4000	4000	4500
3.	Levelling and Ploughing	2437	2625	2812
4.	Bund making (Outer and Inner)	5000	5750	6500
5.	Seed cost	2150	4200	4200
6.	Sowing (labour contract)	1250	1500	1750
7.	Lime 200 kg/ha (cost + labour contract)	3600	3825	4250
8.	Preplant herbicide (cost + labour contract)	1642	1662	1687
9.	Weedicide (Cost + labour contract)	4825	4737	4775
10.	Fertilizer (cost + labour)	18025	17815	18538
11.	Hand weeding & gap filling	8750	8800	9000
12.	Plant protection	6530	6780	7080
13.	Harvesting	4500	4750	5000
14.	Loading	8400	9375	9440
	TOTAL	80109	83319	88282
	Subsidy (Rs. 5500/ha) plus handling charges adjusted	6220	6250	6208
	Cost incurred/ha	73889	77069	82074

Table 5. Continued

Items	Amount (Rs/ha)		
	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Yield during 2015-2016 is 6 tons of grain/ha and the income from 6 tons @ Rs. 21.50/ kg is Rs. 1,29,000			
Yield during 2016-17 is 6.25 tons of grain/ha and the income from 6.25 tons @ Rs. 22.50/kg is Rs. 1,40,625			
Yield during 2017-18 is 5.9 tons of grain/ha and the income from 5.9 tons @ Rs. 23.30/Kg is Rs. 1,37,470			
By Paddy Sales	1,29,000	1,40,625	1,37,470
Cost incurred/ha	73,889	77,069	82,074
Paddy Sales – Cost incurred = Gross income	55,111	63,556	55,396
Other expenses : Lease Rent/ha	35,000	37,500	40,000
Bank Interest @ 4% for Rs. 50,000/-	1000	1,000	1,000
Other expenses Total	36,000	38,500	41,000
Gross Income – Other expenses Total = Net Income Profit/Loss	+19,111	+25,056	+14,396

Table 6. Cost of Production of Rice of three Cultivators in three different areas of Kuttanad in 2017-18 per hectare

	Items	Amount (Rs/ha)		
		Kumarakom	Kavalam	Champakulam
1.	Land preparation	8750	6930	8750
2.	Pumping, Dewatering	4500	4250	4000
3.	Levelling and Ploughing	2812	2737	2810
4.	Bund making (Outer and Inner)	6500	4250	6500
5.	Seed cost	4200	4200	4200
6.	Sowing (labour contract)	1750	1750	1750
7.	Lime 200 kg/ha 140 Kg/ha, 130 Kg/ha (cost + labour contract)	4250	3500	3375
8.	Preplant herbicide (cost + labour contract)	1687	1662	1650
9.	Weedicide (Cost + labour contract)	4775	4750	4775
10.	Fertilizer (cost + labour)	18538	14615	20538
11.	Hand weeding & gap filling	9000	8100	8550
12.	Plant protection	7080	3990	5535
13.	Harvesting	5000	4750	4950
14.	Loading	9440	6600	6325
	TOTAL	88282	72084	83708
	Subsidy (Rs. 5500/ha) plus handling charges adjusted	6208	6220	6190
	Cost incurred/ha	82074	65864	77518

Table 6. Continued

Items	Amount (Rs/ha)		
	Kumarakom	Kavalam	Champakulam
Yield during 2017-2018 is 5.9 tons of grain/ha in Kumarakom and the income from 5.9 tons @ Rs. 23.30 / kg is Rs.1,37,470			
Yield during 2017-18 is 6 tons of grain/ha in Kavalam and the income from 6.25 tons @ Rs. 23.30/kg is Rs. 1,39,800			
Yield during 2017-18 is 5.75 tons of grain/ha in Champakulam and the income from 5.75 tons @ Rs. 23.30/Kg is Rs. 1,33,975			
By Paddy Sales	1,37,470	1,39,800	1,33,975
Cost incurred/ha	82,074	65,864	77,518
Paddy Sales – Cost incurred = Gross income	55,396	73,936	56,457
Other expenses : Lease Rent/ha	40,000	50,000	
Bank Interest @ 4% for Rs. 50,000/-	1,000	1,000	
Other expenses Total	41,000	51,000	
Gross Income – Other expenses Total = Net Income Profit/Loss	+14,396	+22,936	+56,457

Table 7. The Cost of Production of Rice in Autumn, Winter and Summer seasons in Kerala during 2004-2014

YEAR	Cost of Cultivation (Rupees per hectare)		
	Autumn	Winter	Summer
2004-05	21063	20886	25241
2005-06	20913	21284	22437
2006-07	23727	25647	24274
2007-08	24024	28181	28001
2008-09	29862	32199	32652
2009-10	31911	38287	36566
2010-11	36657	45675	41990
2011-12	37406	42127	43185
2012-13	39931	48792	46201
2013-14	59344	55493	57330

Source: An Analytical Study on Agriculture in Kerala (January 2016)

Table 8. Wage Rate in Paddy Cultivation in Kerala, 2006-15 (Wages in Rupees)

Wage Type	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015*
Ploughing	233	266	290	337	370	427	504	587	632	671
Bunding	159	177	200	232	273	333	391	465	511	536
Sowing	148	159	175	204	244	299	354	427	467	497
Spraying Insecticide	167	182	206	238	277	343	396	454	493	519
Harvesting	152	163	186	224	263	320	375	463	512	538
Others	154	171	196	225	270	331	385	466	526	569
Weeding (women)	102	115	136	159	195	242	279	341	365	381
Transplanting (women)	110	123	142	163	196	241	279	339	371	387
Harvesting (women)	130	145	164	195	227	272	313	362	402	428
Others (women)	121	136	151	169	201	253	299	350	381	399

* Average of agricultural wages up to July 2015

Source: An Analytical Study on Agriculture in Kerala

Table 9. Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for Paddy announced by the Government of India and Government of Kerala in Rupees per Quintal

Year	MSP – Central Government	MSP – Kerala
2004-05	560	700
2005-06	570	707
2006-07	580+40 (bonus)	850
2007-08 I	645+100 (bonus)	900
2007-08 II	645+100 (bonus)	1000
2008-09	850+50 (bonus)	1100
2009-10	950 + 50 (bonus)	1200
2010-11 I	1000	1300
2010-11 II	1000	1400
2014-15		1900
2015-16		2150
2016-17		2250
2017-18		2330
2018-19		2530

Note: In 2007-08 and 2010-11, Kerala State Government raised MSP more than once during the course of the year.

Source: Information provided by Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation Ltd, Kochi.

Table 10. Emigrants (EMI) and Out-migrants (OMI) from Kerala (1998 – 2011)

Migrants	1998	2003	2008	2011
Emigrants	13,61,919	18,38,478	21,93,412	22,80,543
Out-migrants	6,91,695	11,15,601	9,14,387	9,30,724

Source: Zachariah & Rajan (2012)

Table 11. Emigrants (EMI) and Outmigrants (OMI) from Alappuzha District (1998-2011)

Migrants	1998	2003	2008	2011
Emigrants	62870	75036	131719	144386
Out-migrants	89523	83538	99308	101331

Source: Zachariah & Rajan (2012)

Table 12. Emigrants (EMI) and Out-migrants (OMI) from Kuttanad Region (2007-2011)

	2007		2011	
	EMI	OMI	EMI	OMI
Kuttanad Region	1,75,310	1,42,559	2,60,988	1,43,684

Source: Zachariah & Rajan (2007 & 2012)

Table 13. Remittances to Kerala (Rupees in Crores)

1991	2006-07	2008	2011	2013-14	2014	2016	2017	2018
3025	24,525	43,288	49,695	72,680	71,142	63,289	90,000	85,000
Source: MMS* (2008)	Z & R* (2007)	Z & R* (2012)	Z & R* (2012)	CDS* (2016)	CDS* (2016)	CDS* (2016)	CDS* (2017)	MMS* (2018)

* MMS – Migration Monitoring Studies. * Z & R – Zachariah and Rajan * CDS – Centre for Development Studies

Table 14. Remittance to Kuttanad Region during 2003 and 2011 (Rupees in crores)

District	2003	2011
Pathanamthitta	955	2079
Alappuzha	1339	2296
Kottayam	580	2419
Total	2874	6794
Kerala State Total	18469	49695

Source: Zachariah & Rajan (2012)

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