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THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF THE IRULAS IN KRISHNAGIRI DISTRICT – A STUDY

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**Abstract:** The Irulas are recognized as the sole indigenous tribal community residing in the Krishnagiri district. Although the Irulas currently inhabit the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, their presence is more widespread and concentrated in Tamil Nadu compared to other regions. The Irulas of Tamil Nadu are broadly categorized into two major groups: the 'Nilgiri Hill Irulas' and the 'Plain Irulas.' The 'Plains Irulas' refer to those members of the community who reside in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu; the Irulas of Krishnagiri district are classified under this 'Plains Irular' category. Within this district, they are found scattered across the Denkanikottai taluk, as well as the Krishnagiri, Barur, and Sulagiri taluks. Generally, they establish their settlements in areas adjacent to forests; they rarely reside in urban areas. They continue to show a lack of interest in availing themselves of formal educational opportunities. Furthermore, they tend to possess a disposition that prefers living in isolation, rather than engaging socially with members of other communities. However, this scenario is slowly changing, as they have established settlements and found employment near urban centres. The Irulas of this region are linguistically distinct, comprising groups that speak Tamil and others that speak a hybrid language blending elements of Kannada and Telugu. Their native language currently lacks a written script. While their traditional occupations generally involved gathering forest produce and collecting honey, contemporary restrictions imposed by the Forest Department have led them to opt for agricultural wage labour instead. Additionally, some families have undertaken the occupation of rearing goats and cattle, utilizing livestock provided to them through subsidies by the Forest Department. Currently, many are migrating to areas surrounding cities in the neighbouring state—specifically Bangalore, Mysore, and Hassan - in search of employment, particularly in construction work and as night watchmen duties. Comparatively, the socio-cultural life of this community is characterized by greater hardship and stunted development when contrasted with the living conditions of other communities residing in the plain regions. It can be assessed that their way of life is even more impoverished than that of the Irulas people of the Nilgiri Hills. This article is undertaken as a study to shed light on their contemporary social life.

**Index terms:** Irulas, Krishnagiri, Socio-cultural life.

## Introduction

Today, tribal communities are people who inhabit forests and forest-fringe lands, sustaining their lives primarily through forest produce. Nevertheless, throughout history, they have lived in close harmony with nature across all types of terrains. They possess distinct lifestyles, economic systems, social practices, and unique rituals that are specifically adapted to their respective environments. They are people who continue to follow the way of life established by their ancestors to this very day. They are the ones who have successfully preserved a self-reliant way of life and, across various dimensions, continue to safeguard their unique cultural identities. In a sense, they are the indigenous inhabitants of this land. According to the 2011 Census, there are 705 distinct tribal groups living in India. Their total population is 104.3 million (10.43 Crores), constituting 8.6% of India's total population.<sup>1</sup>

Although tribal communities are widely distributed across every state in India -extending even to the remote areas of Andaman and Nicobar Islands - they are found significantly larger numbers in states such as Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Kashmir, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, the North East Indian states, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. In Tamil Nadu, 36 Scheduled Tribes currently reside. In addition to these, six other tribal groups - which are not included in the official list - also inhabit in the state.<sup>2</sup> Among the six tribal groups in Tamil Nadu that have been officially designated as 'Primitive Tribal Groups,' the Irula is one. Among the tribal groups, the Irulas claim Tamil Nadu as their ancestral homeland.<sup>3</sup> The Irulas are the sole tribal community residing in the Krishnagiri district. Although they are identified as 'Plains Irular,' they have not evolved into an advanced community - in terms of social development - in the same manner as the Irulas communities found in Chengalpattu and the erstwhile North and South Arcot districts. It is not possible to draw comparisons between them and the Irulas of the Nilgiris. The Irulas of Krishnagiri remain distinct from both these groups and are socially backward. This study highlights their social life.

## The Two Divisions of the Irulas and the History of the Migration of the Hill Irulas

As of today, the Irulas constitute the second-largest tribal community residing in Tamil Nadu. They inhabit the northern districts of Tamil Nadu - specifically Chennai, Thiruvallur, Chengalpattu, Thiruvannamalai, Vellore, Tirupattur, Dharmapuri, and Krishnagiri - as well as the Nilgiris region. Based on the ecological environment of their habitats, they are recognized as two distinct groups: the Hill Irulas (or NilgiriIrulas) and the Plains Irulas (the Irulas of Tamil Nadu's northern districts).<sup>4</sup> Edgar Thurston, too, identifies and studies these groups separately, noting that the Plains Irulas are significantly more advanced in terms of civilization compared to the Hill Irulas (NilgiriIrulas).<sup>5</sup> According to the migration history of the Irulas, it is understood that they originally inhabited the plains surrounding Coimbatore; however, around the 10th century CE, fearing attacks from adversaries, they retreated into dense forest regions.<sup>6,7</sup> While this historical account details their migration into the forests, it does not shed light on their connections with other plains regions.<sup>8</sup> It is noted that there remains a limited understanding regarding the historical linkages between these two distinct groups. The clan names (or 'kulam' names) of three tribal communities - the Hill Irulas(NilgiriIrulas), the Coimbatore (Plains) Irulas, and the Hill Irulas - share striking similarities.<sup>9</sup> Based on this evidence, it is possible to deduce their common origin and their ethnic kinship.<sup>10</sup>

## The Krishnagiri Irulas

The Irulas residing in the Krishnagiri district are traditionally classified as Plains Irulas.<sup>11</sup> They reside throughout the Denkanikottai taluk; in large and widespread numbers within the forest areas of Thali and Anchetty - specifically in NooruUndusamyMalai, Sivapuram, IranaThotti, PeriyaMallahalli, and Thandriyam - as well as in the regions near Kodakkarai, such as Thottiyam and Kottaiyur; and in smaller numbers in the Krishnagiri and Bargur taluks, at locations including SentharaNakkanur, Jagadevi, Aikuntham, Pudur, Thoppadikuppam, K. Kothur, Manavarapalli, and Kuppachipalli.

## Settlements, Huts, and Houses

Within the hamlets, Irulas live as small, isolated groups. Generally, a single hamlet comprises a maximum of 30 huts. There are also settlements consisting of as few as five or six huts. Although some families have migrated to urban areas, the majority still prefer to establish their settlements at the foothills, along the fringes of forests. Most of their huts consist of a single room. The walls of these huts are constructed from mud, reinforced with bamboo poles planted at intervals to ensure structural

stability. They construct their roofs using materials available in the forest - specifically bamboo and a type of grass known as 'Kadambul'. Occasionally, they also built roofs using palm leaves (known as fronds) or coconut fronds. In contemporary times, it is also common to see roofs covered with polythene sheets. Some families who have migrated to the city reside in rented houses with tiled roofs. The government has constructed housing units for the Irula communities living in areas surrounding Bargur - specifically at the Bargur -Kaliyammann Temple site, M.G.R. Nagar, Kamatchipuram, and Krishna Nagar. The number of these housing units has gradually increased from an initial count of 35 in 1989 to 100 today. However, the residents currently lack both the resources and the opportunities to properly maintain these structures.

## Language

Their language, known as 'IrulaMozhi' or 'Irulam,' belongs to the Southern Dravidian language family. However, in earlier periods, there were conflicting opinions regarding the nature of this language. Diploth, a scholar who researched the Irula language, argued that it is a dialect of Tamil.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Kamil Zvelebil asserted that it is a distinct language, separate and independent from Tamil. Edgar Thurston recorded that both groups of Irulas speak a colloquial or 'corrupt' form of Tamil.<sup>1314</sup> R. Periyazhvar, who researched this language, asserts that while it exhibits grammatical elements of Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam, it nevertheless stands as a distinct language in its own right - particularly when examined through its causative and imperative verb forms, as well as various other grammatical structures.<sup>15</sup> His research was conducted among the Hill Irulas of the Nilgiris. The Irula communities residing in the Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri districts speak a hybrid language—a blend of Tamil and Kannada, or Tamil and Telugu, the latter is peculiar to this region and used predominantly than the former. It is noteworthy that these districts of Tamil Nadu are situated along the borders of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh; this linguistic hybridization is a direct result of the interactions these communities have maintained with the neighboring regions. Similarly, the influence of Malayalam grammar observed in the language may be attributed to their interactions with the Kerala region. Regarding the language spoken by the Irulas of the Krishnagiri district, Tulasi Brinda observes that 'while some speak Tamil, others - who are unfamiliar with Tamil - speak Kannada or Telugu.'<sup>16</sup> This observation warrants further investigation. Although the Irula people are dispersed across four southern states, - Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka - the respective state governments have nowhere recorded, within their census data, the existence of Irula communities who speak pure Kannada, Telugu, or Malayalam. Nor does the Government of India's tribal census data contain any such information. It may be said that, before being recognized as a distinct language, 'Irulam' was simply identified as a colloquial or dialectal form of Tamil.

## Daily Life

Until recently, they did not have the custom of bathing daily.<sup>17</sup> Nowadays, however, they eagerly bathe whenever the opportunity arises. Since they often have to walk long distances to reach water bodies or lakes, daily bathing remains an unattainable luxury for them. However, Irulas residing in urban areas have gained access to this facility. Generally, they do not make it a habit to apply oil to their hair or comb it. Nevertheless, the practice of brushing their teeth daily is observed among them; they use neem twigs or ash for this purpose. As their huts lack private restrooms and their settlements lack communal toilets, they continue to use open spaces for their sanitary needs. Despite possessing excellent traditional knowledge regarding the medicinal herbs found in their surroundings, they still lack adequate awareness regarding general sanitation and health. Among those who have migrated to urban areas, significant improvements can be observed in both their lifestyle and economic status.

## Education

Generally, Irulas in the district lack formal education. In recent times, however, they have begun sending their children to school to receive a modern education. Thanks to government schemes and facilities, some parents have come forward to enroll their daughters in residential schools. Primary schools are currently operational in Thottamanchi and Manjigondapalli within the Denkanikottai region. Nevertheless, school dropout rates remain high among them. Since parents often migrate to areas such as Bangalore and Mysore for work or small-scale business ventures, the children are frequently left in the care of their grandparents; this factor also contributes to the high dropout rate.

## Occupation and Economy

Due to their lack of formal education, they do not hold formal or structured employment. Instead, they engage in collecting honey and gathering various forest produce. The Irula people are particularly skilled in the art of honey collection. They skillfully harvest honey from the branches of tall trees and from rocky caves, employing specialized techniques. In recent times, the Forest Department has engaged them for temporary work assignments. In certain regions, they work as agricultural laborers; some are also involved in the timber-cutting. Through the Forest Department, the government has provided them with subsidized goats and cattle; consequently, some families have taken up livestock rearing as a livelihood.<sup>18</sup> Those who have migrated to urban areas have moved to cities in Karnataka - such as Bangalore, Mysore, and Hassan - where they work as construction laborers or as street vendors preparing and selling snacks from pushcarts.

Some members of the Irula community in the Denkanikottai region are engaged in agriculture. They own a small parcel of land situated adjacent to the forests, where they cultivate crops such as ragi (finger millet), sesame, horse gram, and leafy greens. Tamarind trees are also grown in abundance. They raise chickens and roosters, though very few of them own cows or bulls. The Irula people of the Denkanikottai region exchange the forest produce they gather - such as tubers and honey - with members of the Lingayat community (whom they refer to as 'Aiyamar'), who are engaged in farming; in return, they receive the commodities they require, particularly grains like ragi and sorghum.<sup>19</sup> A strong bond characterized by mutual trust exists between the Lingayat community and the Irula people.

### **Diet and Attire**

Traditionally, they are non-vegetarians. Their staple vegetarian food consists primarily of ragi (finger millet). Bulrush millet, also known as millet rice, and honey also feature prominently in their diet. During the rainy season, they consume a specific type of tuber found in the forests, known as 'Irularkizhangu'. Occasionally, they also consume certain types of leaves and greenery in their raw form. During periods of drought, it is observed that they catch rats, roast them, cook them, and consume them. When they lived as hunters, they used to catch deer, wild boar, rabbits, jungle fowl, and flying squirrels. The meat obtained in this manner was distributed among the families residing within the settlement. This system of sharing the hunt no longer exists. The reason for this is that, since hunting in the forests has been prohibited, they no longer have access to game meat or other forest-based food products. Consequently, the form of social security that existed in the past is absent today. In contemporary times, they have transitioned to a dietary pattern that is no longer dependent on traditional forest produce. Another contributing factor to this shift in dietary habits is the availability of food items - such as free rice - provided through the Public Distribution System (Fair Price Shops).

They do not possess any specific traditional attire unique to their community. Men and children wear whatever clothing they can obtain or afford to purchase. Nowadays, among the elder men, the 'veshti' and 'lungi' serve as their daily wear. Women wear sarees paired with blouses. Young men wear trousers and shirts. Changes in clothing styles have also occurred among young women; the 'pavadai-sattai' (skirt and blouse) and 'pavadai-dhavani' (skirt and half-saree) have become their common attire.

### **Marriage**

Among the Irulas of Krishnagiri, marriages are arranged based on the reciprocal exchange of brides and grooms between families linked by the 'Athai-Maman' (aunt-uncle) relationship. This practice differs from the customs observed by Irula communities residing in other plains regions. The Irulas of Krishnagiri district strictly adhere to the system of endogamy. Endogamy is a marital practice confined within a single social group; specifically, both the bride and the groom must belong to the same community. Their society is patriarchal in nature.

Married women adorn themselves with a 'Thali' (sacred thread), 'Meti' (toe rings), bangles, and a nose ring. In contemporary times, vegetarian meals are served to relatives and friends on the wedding day. Previously, non-vegetarian food held a prominent place in wedding feasts. However, restrictions imposed on hunting within forest areas have gradually led them to adopt a vegetarian diet. Nevertheless, in the Thally (Denkanikottai) region, goats and chickens raised domestically are still slaughtered and prepared as feast dishes. This practice is currently gaining traction among Irula communities in other regions as well; however, the traditional custom of serving food derived from wild game has now ceased to exist.

Weddings are conducted with simplicity. The elders of the community convene to determine and finalize the auspicious date for the wedding. The ceremony takes place in the presence of the community's senior elders, and with the consent of the village heads and administrators. These elders do not, however, interfere in the selection of the bride and groom. On the evening of the wedding day, with the couple standing at the groom's residence, the groom ties the 'Thali' around the bride's neck. The groom is required to purchase and present new clothing to the bride's parents - that is, his mother-in-law and father-in-law. The garments presented to the mother-in-law are referred to as 'Paal Kooli' (literally, 'milk wages'); this is regarded as compensation for having breastfed and nurtured the bride during her infancy. Moreover, weddings are typically conducted on any day of the week, with the sole exception of Saturday. These customs are also prevalent among Irula communities residing in other plains regions. It is a matter of concern that they are currently becoming entangled in dowry-related legal cases. Following marriage, the newlyweds typically establish their own independent households.

### **Childbirth and Puberty Rites**

Childbirth is traditionally attended to by an elderly woman within the settlement. However, moving away from this traditional practice - and aided by increased government healthcare facilities - there is a growing trend today of seeking care at Primary Health Centers and Government General Hospitals. The naming ceremony for a newborn is performed on the 15th day after birth. The child undergoes the 'Mottai' (tonsure) ceremony at the temple of their clan deity; this ceremony is conducted in a simple manner, and elaborate feasts or grand celebrations are not typically held on this occasion.

The rituals observed during a girl's attainment of puberty reflect their adherence to traditional customs. Upon reaching puberty, the young woman is housed separately in a designated hut for a period of 11 days. During this time, her maternal uncle's daughter is assigned to stay with her as a companion.

### **Funeral Rites**

They observe two distinct customs regarding the disposal of the deceased: cremation and burial. When burial is chosen, individuals are interred in separate, individual graves. Unlike some other communities, they do not follow the custom of erecting memorial stones over the burial sites; this practice stands in stark contrast to the customs observed by the 'MalaiIrular' (Hill Irula) community.

### **Herbal Knowledge**

The traditional herbal knowledge possessed by the Irula people is both exceptional and renowned. They utilize various plants, tubers, and stems found in the forests as medicinal remedies. Their knowledge regarding local flora is truly remarkable. In addition to treating venomous bites using fresh medicinal leaves, they also practice the custom of performing ritualistic healing (mantra) using neem leaves.

### **Clan Deities, Worship, and Festivals**

They worship Goddess Mariamman as their primary clan deity. During festivals dedicated to her, they offer sacrifices of chickens - and, depending on their financial means, goats - to the Goddess. The influence of the Shaivite tradition of Hinduism is also significant; they worship Lord Shiva, specifically in the form of 'Madeswaran', at the Madeswaran Hills located between Mettur and Kollegal in Karnataka. Some among them bear names associated with Lord Shiva and his various incarnations.

They celebrate the Dasara festival, which is referred to as the Aimasar festival. They observe the Shivaratri festival in March, the Madeswaran festival in May, and the Mariamman festival during the months of June and July.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The Irulas - the second-largest tribal group in Tamil Nadu in terms of population - are considered to be the sole indigenous community residing in the Krishnagiri district. Although they are classified as 'Plains Irular,' they have not achieved the same level of socio-economic progress as other Plains Irular communities inhabiting the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. Similarly, their way of life differs significantly from that of the 'Hill Irular' - specifically, the Irula community of the Nilgiris. Among the Irular of Krishnagiri, those living in the forest-fringe areas of the Denkanikottai region enjoy a relatively better standard of living; while some even own small plots of land and engage in cultivation, they have not yet achieved substantial progress in their social sphere. This situation persists primarily because they remain dependent on traditional occupational methods and largely work as agricultural laborers. Conversely, the lifestyles of Irula communities residing in the Krishnagiri and Bargur regions, as well as in urban centers, are undergoing significant transformation. Modernization is taking root rapidly among these groups, driven by emerging trends such as migrating to urban centers in neighboring states in search of employment and engaging in small-scale trade. Nevertheless, regarding their social life - including marriage customs, ceremonies, festivals, and social structure - they maintain a steadfast adherence to their traditional customs and practices.

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