



Socio-cultural Profile of Irular Community in Tamil Nadu

KEYWORDS

Socio-cultural Profile, Life Style, Ceremonies

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ABSTRACT *Scheduled Tribes are one of the social excluded groups in India. According to the 2011 census, they are 104.45 million which constitutes 8.6 per cent of the country's total population. The Scheduled Tribe population in Tamil Nadu is 7,94,697 and constitutes 1.1 per cent of the population of the state as per the 2011 census. In the state, there are 36 Scheduled Tribe communities, of which 6 viz., Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Irula, Paniyan and Kattunayakan are the Primitive Tribal Groups. In 2006 the government of India proposed to rename "Primitive Tribal Group" as "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group" with the purpose of enabling improvement in the conditions of certain communities with particularly low development indices. The present paper discusses about the socio-cultural profile of the Irular community in Tamil Nadu with the help secondary sources.*

Introduction

India is a land of numerous cultures and people. The term "tribe" means a group of people that have lived at a particular place from time immemorial. The tribal people reside in approximately 15% of the country's area. Indian tribals primarily reside in various ecological and geo-climatic conditions ranging from plains, forests, hills and inaccessible areas, scattered throughout India. According to Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, at present, there exist 697 tribes recognized by the central government. These Indian tribal groups have been recognized to reside in more than one state. More than half of the Indian tribal population is concentrated in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Jharkhand and Gujarat.

The tribal population is an integral part of India's social fabric and has the second largest concentration after that of the African continent. The population of tribal communities scheduled in the Constitution of India is known as Scheduled Tribes (STs) was 10.42 crore (1 crore = 10 million) as per 2011 census and accounts for 8.6 % of the total population. 5.24 crores are men and 5.18 crores are women, accounting for 8.41 % and 8.82 % respectively.

Table No. 1

Total Population, Scheduled Tribe Population –
India, Tamil Nadu and Dharmapuri District in 2001 and 2011
Census

Year	Place	Sex	Total Population	Scheduled Tribes
2001	India	Persons	1028610328	84326210
		Male	532156772	42640829
		Female	496453556	41685411
	Tamil Nadu	Persons	62405679	651621
		Male	31400909	328917
		Female	31004770	322404
Dharmapuri	Persons	2856300	59549	
	Male	1473597	30520	
	Female	1382703	29029	

2011	India	Persons	1210569753	104545716
		Male	623121843	52547215
		Female	587447730	51998501
	Tamil Nadu	Persons	72147030	794697
		Male	36137975	401068
		Female	36009055	363629
	Dharmapuri	Persons	1290530	60609
		Male	665884	30863
		Female	624646	29746

Source: Census of India 2011

The formation of Krishnagiri district, framed out of Dharmapuri district as 30th district of Tamil Nadu on February 9, 2004

Rural and Urban Composition of Tribal Population in India

The Census of 1971 recorded 36,408,514 Scheduled Tribes population in India which increased to 104,545,716 in 2011 Census. The growth of Scheduled Tribes population in this period is 187.1 percent. Majority of Scheduled Tribes population are residing in rural areas of the country. The percentage of rural scheduled tribes population was 96.48 in 1971 which decreased to 90 percent in 2011. Very small percentage (3.52%) of scheduled tribes population was residing in urban areas in 1971 which has improved to 10 percent in 2011. This shows that tribals are migrating to urban areas in search of employment.

Table No. 2

Proportion of Scheduled Tribe Population in India 1971-2011
(in %)

Census Year	Proportion of Scheduled Tribes to Total Population		
	Total	Rural	Urban
1971	6.8	8.3	1.2
1981	7.8	9.5	2.0
1991	8.1	10.1	2.3
2001	8.2	10.4	2.4
2011	8.6	11.3	2.8

Categories of Tribal Communities in Tamil Nadu

Based on Characteristics like certain primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness, the Government of Tamil Nadu has so far identified 36 communities as tribals of Tamil Nadu. The lists of 36 Tribal communities are given as follows. They are sparsely located throughout the districts of Tamil Nadu.

1. Adiyar
2. Aranadan
3. Eravallan
4. Irular
5. Kadar
6. Kammara (excluding Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district)
7. Kanikaran, Kanikkar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district)
8. Kaniyan, Kanyan
9. Kattunayakan
10. Kochu Velan
11. Konda Kapus
12. Kondareddis
13. Koraga
14. Kota (excluding Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district)
15. Kudiya, Melakudi
16. Kurichchan
17. Kurumbas (in the Nilgiri district)
18. Kurumans
19. Maha Malasar
20. Malai Arayan
21. Malai Pandaram
22. Malai Vedan
23. Malakkuravan
24. Malasar
25. Malayali (in Dharmapuri, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Pudukkottai, Salem, Namakkal, Villupuram, Cuddalore, Tiruchirappalli, Karur and Perambalur districts)
26. Malayekandi
27. Mannan
28. Mudugar, Muduvan
29. Muthuvan
30. Palleyan
31. Palliyar
32. Palliyar
33. Paniyan
34. Sholaga
35. Toda (excluding Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district)
36. Uraly

The above said 36 tribal communities are categorized into three groups.

a. Category I

Those who migrated to the hilly areas of the northern part of the Eastern Ghats in Tamil Nadu from the adjoining plains around 16th Century and mingled with the local inhabitants of those tribes. : Malayalies of ITDP areas.

b. Category II

Those who originally belong to or had migrated to the part of Western Ghats lying within Tamilnadu.

- : Primitive Tribes
 - (i). Todas
 - (ii). Kothas
 - (iii). Kollunaikens
 - (iv). Kurumbas

(v). Panias

(vi). Irulars

(vii). Kadars

(viii). Sholagars etc.

c. Category III

Others to be found in the hilly areas and plains of other districts.

Irulars in Tamil Nadu

One of the largest tribes in Tamil Nadu is Irular, they are dravidian tribe found in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh (Chittoor) and Karnataka. The word 'Irular' derived from Tamil word called "Irul" which means 'darkness'. 'Irular' means those who are in darkness. Curly hair and dark complexion is their prominent feature. Irulars speak Tamil dialect. They are socially, economically and politically backward. Their socio-economic living conditions have been marked by poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and lack of social and economic security. They struggle hard for their bare necessities. Since most of them are illiterate they have not been able to come out of pathetic living conditions. Overall the living conditions of irulars are unstable and pitiable.

It is of great importance to find out the major cause for their under development. According to Tamilnadu government there were 36 identified tribal communities; Irulars form the largest tribal group. Total population of Scheduled Tribes in Tamilnadu is about 6.5 lacs in 2001. There is decrease trend in population of the Irula tribes. Now there are only 23,116 Irula households in Tamil Nadu (Census, 2011). Irulars were mainly concentrated in north-eastern part of Tamilnadu - Chengalpattu, Kanchipuram, Thiruvannamalai, Thiruvallur and Villupuram district. Beside Salem and Dharmapuri, few Irula found in Western Ghats of Nilgiri hills; art, music, dance and religion are essential parts of their lives. These Irulars were adept in handling snakes and work as guides in the forest. Early 20th century anthropological literature classified the Irulars under the Negro ethnic group.

The Irular, scheduled tribal community of south India has been facing several socio-economic problems since last two decades. Earlier the Irula tribes were hunters and they have known for their special expertise in snake trapping. They earned their livelihood by catching the snake, snare, rats, selling firewood, honey and its bee wax. Indian Government banned the export of snake skins in 1976, under Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 due to that Irula tribe lost a major source of income and their occupational life has been affected and they forced to work as agriculture 'coolie'. Their life - style is slowly changing from their original forest dweller existence to the mainstream.

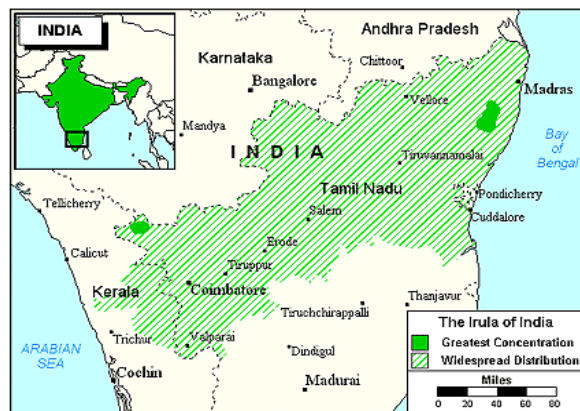


Fig. 1. Geographical Spread of Irular Tribe in Tamil Nadu

a. Life Style

Living in forests, they used to hunt and procure forest resources. They were descendants of gypsies. Subsequently they began to live in huts made of bamboo and slowly learnt the art of cultivation. Irulars had to look on helplessly when licensed contractors were going on a deforestation spree. Due to scarcity of bamboos, they began to build huts with soil and stones. When the hills were occupied by the people of the valley, Irular drew back to interior woods.

When natives made inroads to their settlements, Irular shifted their forest bases from one to another and in this process cultivation too underwent transition. Ragi, mustard, grains and pulses are the main cultivation. There are Irular landlords, who own 5 to 10 acres of land. But due to shortage of rains, cultivation of grains is becoming less. They used to change the land of cultivation although they don't shift their houses. Even this practice is under revision now. Cattle-breeding is another source of income. Wild resources like honey, frankincense, firewood and the like are also collected. Earlier rice was consumed only during festivals. Now due to the lack of cultivation, rice has become their staple food. Beef is not consumed by Irular. But meats of chicken, goat, pig and fish are favourites. They cook once a day for supper.

b. Birth Ceremony

There are many Irular customs and observances involved from the birth to death of a person. When pregnancy approaches a tent is erected near the woman's house. Elderly women who are well versed in magic are to attend the pregnant woman. When the child is born, the child's aunt takes a glass of water and sprinkles it on the child. For seven days nobody will go out of the tent and none will be allowed to enter the tent. Food will be sent to occupants in the tent. On the seventh day child will be named and it is a big ceremony. The name will be the name of grandfather or grandmother. Rangan, Nanjan, Marutan, Kalimuthu, Kalithamma, Vaduki, Muruki are some common names. For three months relatives other than the immediate parents, should not touch the child. Those three months are taboo or termed as unholy. Those days the mother should eat and take rest without doing any work while the father will attend to all work.

c. Marriage Ceremony

Marriage is fixed for girls within the age limit of 12 -18 whereas boy's age is from 14-24. People from the same clan within the Irular tribe do not intermarry. Marriages are fixed within the family by the parents. Bride prize has to be given to girl's house in the form of cash or cattle. Marriage is arranged in the presence of tribal chief. The marriage ceremony takes place in the ancestral home where the village god is installed. An elder called Guruvan presides over this. Marriages that do not have the acknowledgement of a local panchayat are considered invalid.

d. Death Ceremony

One's death will be proclaimed to everyone. The village elder will walk with a stick stretched forward. This communicates the death. The body will be kept in a typical tent on a bamboo platform, in a posture where both the legs had to be drawn backwards and tied. The closest relatives bring water from the river. Water is drawn after uttering the name of the dead person three times without looking left or right. Ground saffron or turmeric liquid mixture is sprinkled over the body. Visitors spread white dhoti (cloth) over the body if the dead is male and colour cloth in case of female. Relatives and others who gather will settle civil as well financial disputes. If the dead is a married woman, seven persons from seven clan remove the thali (marital necklace). Later they rejoice and dance giving thanks to the god

for preserving them till then. This rejoicing is known as Shapparayattam. Mourning and weeping is not done in the house. Body will be buried after 3 days. Till then the Shapparayattam continues. Body that is wrapped in linen is buried in the pit dug, where there will be a furrow to place the head. This is to avoid the falling of mud on the head! After the burial it is customary that food is served on the banks of the brook.

Irular who comes back after the burial, warms his feet by setting afire grass (straw), which is pulled out from the roof. A full pot of water is kept at the entrance of the house. Caster or jingly oil is dropped into this water with a thin stick. First drop is dripped by invoking the name of the dead person and the second drop by uttering the name of the father. When the two drops joined, the head of the family touches it and applies it on his forehead. Before entering the house, occupants need to bathe. This ceremony is referred to as Nizhalkoothu.

In appearance, the widow or the widower has to live as they saw each other at last before one's death. This is observed so as to recognise each other after the other too died. This demonstrates that the Irular believe in life after death.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural profiles of the Irular community are very unique in nature and that should be preserved. Nowadays the Irular people began to migrate to the nearby urban areas in search of better and continuous employment. This type of migration should be stopped among this tribal community otherwise they will lose their socio-cultural identity. Therefore the following measures should be taken on a war foot basis.

- Better connectivity of road as well as communication system should be ensured to this community.
- Proper education facility along with vocational courses should be provided in the premises of Irular community.
- Self employment programmes as well as skill development programmes should be conducted at the regular intervals.
- Better health facility should be established in their localities.

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