

## The Irular of Tamil Nadu

C.R. SATHYANARAYANAN

The Irular comprise the second largest Scheduled Tribe in Tamil Nadu, next to the Malayali tribe. As per the 2001 census, out of the total Scheduled Tribe population of 6,51,321 in Tamil Nadu, the Irular are 1,55,606, the second largest group spread over in several districts of Tamil Nadu. The largest Scheduled Tribe in Tamil Nadu are the Malayali having a population of 3,10,042 distributed largely in the Jawadi, Shervarayan, Kalrayan and Pachamalai hills. It should be noted here that the tribal community of Malayali is different from the Malayalam-speaking Keralites in Tamil Nadu who are also generally known as Malayali. Among the six PVTGs notified in Tamil Nadu, namely, the Toda, Kota, Kurumbas (in the Nilgiri district), Irular, Kattunayakan and Paniyan, the Irular are the largest with differing cultural characteristics across the Tamil-speaking regions. In fact, it is generally agreed that 'Irula' is a generic name used to denote a few distinct communities inhabiting different terrains within Tamil Nadu. The name 'Irula', in fact, as per the local versions cited by Edgar Thurston (1909), Zvelebil (1981), Sathyanarayanan (1985), and Perialwar (1997) has its root in the Tamil term *irul* which means darkness or blackness, which may be in reference to the darkness of the jungles where the Irula have been living in the extensions of Western Ghats in south India or due to the darkness of their skin.

## Identity and Distribution

The Irula, as reported from the time of Thurston in early 1900, seem to be living as two distinctive groups in Tamil Nadu. The first group inhabiting the Nilgiris-Coimbatore-Sathyamangalam hill ranges having slight linguistic variations among themselves but with more or less same cultural characteristics and common occupational traits. The second group, a comparatively larger group with a totally differing linguistic, occupational and cultural characteristics in clear contrast with the former group, occupy the northern and central Tamil Nadu districts like Chengleput, Kanchipuram, Thiruvannmalai, Villupuram, Dharmapuri, and so on. But both the groups have been termed broadly as Irular in official and ethnographic records.

[https://www.academia.edu/29917581/The\\_Irular\\_of\\_Tamil\\_Nadu\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/29917581/The_Irular_of_Tamil_Nadu_pdf)

in: **The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India (2016)**  
K. Misra (ed.) Delhi, Anthropological Survey of India  
pp. 187-194

It needs to be mentioned here that generally no dispute arises in the identity and claim of the first group inhabiting the Nilgiris-Coimbatore-Sathyamangalam hill ranges as Irular, whereas in the case of the second group, often objections have been raised by the revenue officials in recognizing them as Irular and issuing certificates to them under the Scheduled Tribe category, because of their popular synonym *Vettaikarar* and their associated traditional occupation of rat, snake and wild lizard (*udumbu*) catching which are not generally practiced by the Nilgiris-Coimbatore Irulars. Besides, the name *Vettaikarar* is also included in the Most Backward Classes of Tamil Nadu. In fact, the terms *Vettaikarar*, *Vettaikaran*, *Villian*, *Villi* and *Shikari* stand for a hunter, denoting a person professing hunting, i.e. *vettai* in Tamil. A hunter is generally called *Vettaikarar* or *Vettaikaran*. Therefore, going by this interpretation, if a group by tradition is involved in hunting as a mode of subsistence, which in fact is identified as a typical characteristic of a Scheduled Tribe in India, then that group has all the justification to claim ST status. It has been reported during this study that the demand of the *Vettaikarar*, *Villian*, *Villi* and *Shikari* people to be recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in Tamil Nadu under this particular justification has not been agreed to so far. It is erroneous to keep them under the BC or OBC category as it is found in Tamil Nadu. The appropriate measure to sort out this issue is to create an entry in the ST list of Tamil Nadu for the *Vettaikarar* or *Vettaikaran* or *Villian*, *Villi* or *Shikari* living in Chengleput, Kanchipuram, Thiruvannmalai, Villupuram, and Dharmapuri districts, i.e. with area restrictions, so that these people are not clubbed and confused with the Irular living in Nilgiris-Coimbatore areas. Barely the same name exists for two culturally distinct groups. However, the second group of Irular-cum-*Vettaikarar* continue to fight for their ST certificates as Irular, primarily by citing the Census of India enumerations in northern and central Tamil Nadu as Irular. This long pending issue of the people concerned needs to be immediately attended to by the Government of Tamil Nadu, seeking inputs from appropriate professional bodies of Government of India like the Anthropological Survey of India. Bringing area restrictions for ST communities, especially in the case of PVTGs of Tamil Nadu, who are relatively small and underdeveloped and confined to specific areas, is the most effective way of planning and spending for the development of these groups.

Coming to the Irular sub-groups living within Tamil Nadu, the major sub-groups identified include Malenadu Irular, found in and around Kotagiri taluk in the Nilgiri district; Kasaba or Kasaba-speaking Irular living in the Masinagudi areas of Gudalur taluk in Nilgiri district; the classic Irula language-speaking Irular living in Coonoor-Mettupalaiyam-Coimbatore stretches, especially in and around the Vellingiri and Siruvani hills and the adjoining Attappadi areas of Palghat district, Kerala; Urali Irular, also called as

Sholagar, Soliga or Urali Soliga, found in the Sathyamangalam hill ranges in Tamil Nadu and in the adjoining Chamaraja Nagar district of the Karnataka state. Whereas, the *Vettaikarar* or *Vettaikaran* or *Shikari* Irular who are no way connected to the Nilgiri-Coimbatore Irulas, as mentioned above, live in large number in the northern and central districts of Tamil Nadu.

#### Language

The *Vettaikarar* or *Villian* of northern and central districts speak a Tamil dialect whereas the other groups speak different dialects of Irula language. The Irular has a legend for their origin from a place called Perur in the Kongu region, an important trade centre. When they were displaced from their homes, their chieftain, named Kovan or Koyan, led their exodus to the Coimbatore plains, where he founded 'the new town of Koyanpudur' which eventually became Coimbatore (Zvelebil 1983, cf. Perialwar 1997).

#### Social Organization

In studies made on Irular of Nilgiris-Coimbatore-Sathyamangalam hill ranges, it has been mentioned that the Irular were living as hunter-gatherers and marginal millet cultivators by shifting cultivation. With regard to their social organization, Perialwar (1997) identifies 13 clans among the Malenadu Irular, namely, Kupee, Campe, Punge, Kalkatti, Pirada, Koduve, Kurunaga, Devane, Kuppili, Uppili, Velle, Arumuppu and Poriga. Zvelebil (1981) on the other hand has listed only 12 clans and further divided them under two endogamous moieties, each having seven and five clans respectively. It has been also reported that these patrilineal clans are named after their settlements and they are territorial in nature. In the Siruvani and Vellingiri hill areas it has been reported that the Irulars are divided into clans (*kulam*s) such as, Sambe or Sambar, Kuppe or Kuppar, Peradhara, Karattiar or Karattiga. The Sambar further sub-divides into Sudu Sothu Sambar, Pazhaya Sothu Sambar, Mandai Vetti Sambar and such lineages; similarly Karattiar *kulam* subdivides into Poonthalai Karattiar and Karunthalai Karattiar. Each clan has its own clan god or *kula devam*.

The head of a settlement is called *mooppa*n, assisted by two male functionaries in every settlement, namely, *kuruthalai* and *vandari*; their religious head is known as *mannukkaran*. It was also reported that their headman was called *pattakaran* with a deputy named *kolkaran*. The *mooppa*n is chosen by the inhabitants of the settlement and he acts as the link between his community and government authorities. The *mannukkaran* is the one who has knowledge of agricultural practices and knows the fertility conditions of the soil. While beginning agriculture, he sows the first seeds after performing certain rituals and making offerings for a successful crop.

In the Nilgiris-Coimbatore-Anaikatty areas, although the traditional functionaries are continuing to exist in several of their settlements, they have really lost their importance and significance due to several factors like large-scale influx and settling of outsiders in their living areas, constant culture contact, loss of land and property to the immigrant settlers, dependence on moneylenders, rapid urbanization, and so on.

### Religion and Social Control

The Irular of Nilgiris-Coimbatore follow a local form of Vaishnavite Hinduism, celebrate the festivities at Rangasamy Peak in Nilgiris, Karaimadai Ranganathar temple and Ranganatha Temple in B.R. Hills. The festivity of the Bokkapuram Mariamman temple, mainly conducted by the Irular is attended by thousands of tribal and non-tribal people of the Nilgiris.

While examining the ethnographic material on Alu Kurumba, Mudugar and Irular, we find that there are linguistic affinities and common customary practices. The Mudugar share certain features with the neighbouring Irular of Nilgiris-Coimbatore and Attappadi. The most striking among these features is related to the social control mechanisms witnessed in these tribes. For example, the title *mooppan* denotes a headman, *kuruthalai* and *bhandari* (*vandari* in the case of Irula) represent the assistants of the headman and the *mannukkaran* acts as religious head or priest among the Irula and Mudugar. Among the Alu Kurumba who live closeby and also co-exist with Irular in some settlements in Kotagiri taluk, names and roles of these functionaries are one and the same.

### Irular of Northern and Central Tamil Nadu

With regard to the Irulas of erstwhile Chingleput, North and South Arcot districts in Tamil Nadu, Thurston (1909) mentioned that there were two categories of Irular in the North Arcot district, of which one lived in towns and villages, and the other led a jungle life. Among those found near Kuppam, now in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, there were two distinct divisions called Iswaran Vagaita and Dharmaraja. The Irular of South Arcot district, found in and around the Gingee hills, Villupuram and Tirukkoyilur taluks, were reported to be speaking a corrupt Tamil and were scattered in huts, two or three in one place, and subsisted by watching or guarding the crops and lived in poorest conditions. Very few of them owned dry lands and they subsisted by honey collection. They worshipped seven Kannimars who were their favourite deities. Like the Yerukalas, they were involved in soothsaying. The Yerukala fortune-teller used to go out with her basket, cowry shells, and a rod or stick whereas the Irula, on the contrary, remained at his home, and used to tell fortunes close to his hut, or near the hut where his gods

were kept. In case of sickness, people of all classes used to consult the Irula fortune-teller, whose occupation was known as *kannimar varniththal*. The name Shikari (hunter) was occasionally adopted as a synonym for Irula. And, in South Arcot, some Irulas called themselves as Ten (honey) Vanniyans or Vana (forest) Pallis (Thurston 1909 vol. II: 390-1).

### Demographic and Development Scenario of the Irular in Nilgiri District

As per the Socio-Economic Survey of Scheduled Tribes in Nilgiris District conducted during 2010-11 by the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty, the Irular are living in 61 settlements scattered in 17 panchayats, namely, Arakkodu, Thengumarada, Kengarai, Konavakarai, Kadinamala, Kunjappanai, Kodanadu, Denadu, Nandhipura, Kookai, Hulical, Kvokkal, Masinagudi, Sholur, Ebbanad, Mel Kundah and Burliar. In Nilgiri district alone, the Irular constitute a population of 6,020 (males 2,974 and females 3,046; i.e. 49.4 per cent males and 50.6 per cent females) living in 1,635 households. But in the 2001 census, the Irular were enumerated as 8,677 in Nilgiris district. A decrease in Irular population (of 2,000 people) has been reported in the 2011 enumeration of the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty.

In many of the settlements and living areas of the Irular in Nilgiris district, a number of Alu Kurumba as well as non-tribal families working as plantation labourers also live side by side. It is said that during the Census of India enumerations, the Alu Kurumba as well as the non-tribal families living there were also returned as Irular by census enumerators. Whereas, the 2010-11 enumeration of the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty was done using the youth from Irular and Alu Kurumba communities and only those belonging to the Irular families were enumerated. This could be a primary reason for the decline observed in Irular population of Nilgiris district. Migration of the Irular of Nilgiris down to the Coimbatore and adjoining Anaikatti areas in search of wage labour has been also reported and this might have also resulted in decrease in Irular population in the Nilgiris.

The 2010-11 enumeration of the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty has observed the highest population of Irular in Nilgiris in Thoddingi or Thuttulingi settlement in Sholur Panchayat of Ooty, i.e. 100 households with 425 persons, followed by Anaikatti in Ebbanad Panchayat, Ooty, with 102 households having 399 persons. Settlements with a few households or single household of Irular were found at Pongamokkai, Kettukarai, Kumbaramudi, Sundaipatty, Nandhipatti, Kunjapanai Mandharai, Chinnala Kombai in the Kotagiri taluk.

The population percentage of Irular children in the age group of 0-18 years is 35.67 per cent; the population of Irular male children in the age group of 0-18 is 35.81 per cent and the female children in this category are 35.52 per

cent, indicating the balanced growth in the child sex ratio. Nearly half of the Irular population (48.58 per cent) is found to be in the productive age group of 19-45 years. An insignificant proportion, i.e. 3.69 per cent of the population comprising 222 number of Irulas are found in the age group of 'above 60 years' and among them 3.8 per cent are males and 7.1 per cent are females. This indicates that Irular women survive for longer years compared to their men.

#### Literacy

Irular community was the most laggard in literacy in the past decades. But there is a substantial improvement now. About half of the Irulars in the Nilgiris district, i.e. 52.62 per cent women and 36.82 per cent men who have crossed the normal age for education, are found to be illiterates. About 29.29 per cent of their children are attending primary school but the children entering high school is only 27.36 per cent. The enrolment for higher secondary level is 1.83 per cent and merely 0.91 per cent of them are in colleges doing graduation.

#### Marital Status

Among the tribal communities, the incidence and practice of getting the girl married immediately after she attains puberty is still high. About 0.92 per cent males and 4.65 per cent females in the Irular community under the age group of 21 years are married. About 6.40 per cent males remain as widowers whereas 16.64 per cent females are widows. Among the married population of the Irular, an insignificant percentage (0.34 per cent) of men and 3.65 per cent of women live as separated, breaking their marital bond.

#### Occupation and Source of Income

The principal occupation of the Irular is agriculture labour. Majority (87.07 per cent) of the Irular are reported to be earning through wage labour and also to some extent as marginal farmers, cultivating millets, fruits and vegetables. They are also in possession of some livestock like goat and cows for additional income. An insignificant percentage (0.58) of them are employed in government service; 0.42 per cent of them in private jobs; 9.81 per cent of them are employed in tea and coffee plantations as daily wage labourers; 2.09 per cent of the Irular get old age pension. It has been observed that still a large number of Irular families are in the clutches of moneylenders, most of their earning getting spent towards settling of their loans taken on hefty interest rates and often in spending for liquor.

It has been found during this survey that more than 50 per cent of the population (55.90 per cent), i.e. 914 Irular families live in tiled houses, 23.91 per cent of them in concrete houses and 20.18 in thatched and unsafe huts.

#### Electricity Connection

Limited power supply is provided even to the remote Irular tribal settlements as an outcome of governmental schemes, like, Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY). Free power is supplied to 1,490 Irular families i.e. 91.13 per cent of them in the Nilgiris but 8.87 per cent of their households still remain un-electrified.

#### Drinking Water

It is consoling to find that more than half of the Irular households (63 per cent) have access to safe drinking water through the taps; 4.10 per cent use hand pumps depending on ground water and 33.91 per cent depend on dug wells and streams. The coverage norms of government for water supply specify that the water source should exist within 1.6 km in the plains and within 100 m elevation in the hilly areas.

#### Sanitation

Majority of the Irular community people (nearly 83.12 per cent), do not have a toilet facility. A small percentage of them (16.88 per cent) use the community toilet facility.

#### Possession of Title Deeds (*Patta*) for Homestead Land

Vast majority (90.34 per cent) of the Irulars in the Nilgiris do not possess *patta* for their homestead land and only 9.66 per cent of them possess the *patta*. The government-provided agricultural lands for cultivation, without *patta*, seemed to have been given on lease to the outsiders for petty money and the Irular by and large work as daily wage labourers in the agricultural fields of the outsiders.

#### Possession of Community Certificates, Voter ID, Tribal ID and Ration Cards

It is reported that 89.36 per cent of the Irulars have ration cards and 71.68 per cent of them have voter identity cards. Most of them have not received their tribal identity cards. It is also reported that only 37.99 per cent of the Irulars

have received their community certificates and above half of the population, i.e. 62.01 per cent do not possess the community certificates.

#### Schools and Health Centres

Among the 61 Irular settlements, 9 have schools within the settlement. Five settlements have schools at the distance of below 1 km. Forty-six settlements have schools at the distance of 1-5 km and one settlement has school beyond 5 km. For nearly half of them, i.e. for 41.0 per cent of them, the Primary Health Centers (PHCs) are located at a distance of 1-5 km, for 3.3 per cent of them, the PHCs are functioning at the distance of less than 1 km and for the 26.2 per cent of them, the health centres are at a distance of above 6-10 km of travel. For 3.3 per cent of them, i.e. in 2 hamlets, the health centres are located within the settlement and for another 3.3 per cent of them, the Health Centres are at distance between 16-20 km. In this area, the government, through a vast network of PHCs, has provided minimum health services to the Irulars. Besides the PHCs of the government, NGOs too, like the AIMS for Seva, NAWA, CTRD Trust and ACCORD have set up their medical facilities for the welfare of the tribal communities in various parts of the Nilgiris and these are also effectively used by the tribal people of Nilgiris.

#### References

- Perialwar, R., 1997, 'Irular', in K.S. Singh (ed.), *People of India: Tamil Nadu*, Chennai: Affiliated East-West Press, pp. 474-80.
- Sathyanarayanan, C.R., 1985, 'Kinship Organization among the Irulars of Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu', unpublished M.A. dissertation, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Madras.
- , 2011, 'Scheduled Tribes of Nilgiris District', a Report prepared under the Socio-Economic Survey of Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu, Ooty: Tribal Research Centre, Govt. of Tamil Nadu.
- Thurston, E., 1909, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, (rpt. 1975).
- Zvelebil, Kamil V., 1981, 'Problems of Identification and Classification of Some Nilagiri Tribes', in *Anthropos*, vol. 76, pp. 467-528.

