



Living Conditions of Irula Tribes in Gingee Taluk, Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

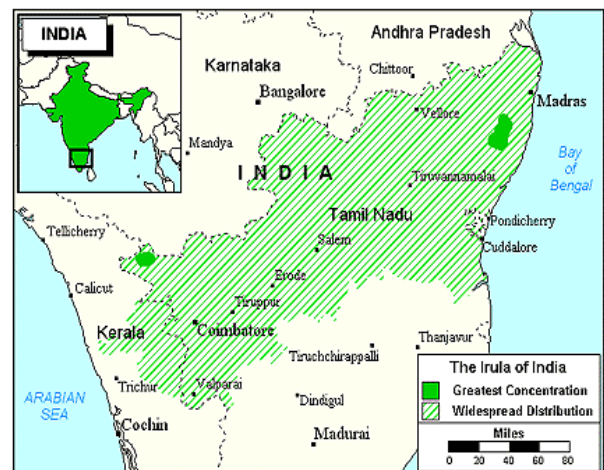
India has the largest tribal population than any other country in the world. The Tribals in India constitute nearly 8.2% (84.3 million) of the India's total population of them 91.7% of them living in rural areas and 8.3% in urban areas (Census 2001, India). Out of 84.3 million tribes more than half of the Tribes were concentrated in the States of Madhya Pradesh (14.5%), Maharashtra (10.17%), Orissa (9.66%), Gujarat (8.87%), Rajasthan (8.42%) and Jharkhand (8.4%) and State wise *Mizoram* (98%), Meghalaya (90%), Nagaland (84%), Arunachal Pradesh (68%) has tribals followed by Manipur (38%), Sikkim (28%), Madhya Pradesh (24%), Orissa (22 %) and Assam (21%). Madhya Pradesh has the largest concentration of tribal population in India. Largest numbers(62) of Scheduled Tribes are in the State of Odisha. Gonds is the largest tribe in India followed by Bhills and Santhals. In Punjab and Haryana and 3 UTs (Puducherry, Delhi and Chandigarh), it is reported that there were no tribal population (Annual Report, MoTA, 2012). But few tribes are found in Pondicherry region.

Irulars in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu constitutes 1% of total India's tribal population. One of the largest tribes in Tamil Nadu is Irular, they are dravidian tribe found in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala Andhara(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. According to Tamilnadu government there were 36 identified tribal communities; Irulars form the largest tribal group which is more than one lakh [Census1991, Rann Singh Mann, 1996]. 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 Irulas under the Negrito ethnic group.

Irula Tribes in Kerala

According to 2001 Census the scheduled tribal population in Kerala is 3,64,189 (female-184,020; male-180169). Wayanad has the highest number of tribals(1,36,062) followed by Idukki(50973) and Palakkad (39665) districts. Paniyar(Paniya) are the largest tribe among the major 35 tribes in Kerala. There are 18,698 irulars seen in Attapady area of Mannarkadu Taluk in Palakkad District and also seen in Nelliampathy, Pothuppara, Mayamudi, Palakkapandi, Koonapalam of Chittur Taluk and Valayar hills. Their literacy rate is 11.8. Mainly they are engaged in agriculture. Irular community in Kerala are different in features and in their occupation from the Irular seen in other parts of south India.



Source: Bethany World Prayers Centre, 1999



Statement of the problem: Through the process of modernization by acquiring the lands of tribes for building infrastructure and constant increase in reserved forests puts the Irula tribes into social displacement. The uprooting of tribes was often carried out with little concern for their rehabilitation. Compensation was viewed from purely economic angle and other basic needs of the tribes have been overlooked. Tribals who are for centuries have been the best protectors of forest are facing severe crisis. 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.

Studies on Irula Tribes: Jahanara (2008) reported that 73% of irula tribes in Pondicherry live in below poverty line, less than one-third were belong lower socio-economic status, 3% were belong to middle socio-economic status. 83% were illiterate, 5% middle and primary school respectively, 2% high school and only 1% completed intermediate. Study revealed that nutrient intake of irulas of Pondicherry is not accordance with the daily recommended requirement. All the women irulas suffer from anaemia and underweight. 80% of them suffer from thiamine deficiency. most of the irula children and adults do not consume milk in any form on regular basis including pregnant women. Their height and weight was below the standard level of the general population.

AnkitaArya(2004) conducted a study on nutrition and health status of irula children of Pondicherry from five villages namely rajankulam, amtakulam, koonichampet, cittipet, T.N.Palyam. 48 children age ranging from 4-9 years were studied. Study found that 71% of the children having household income of 1000 to 2000, 20% Rs.500 to 1000 and 9% Rs.2000 to 2500. This study revealed that irula children energy intake was 1411.5, protein(35.5), fat(29.0), minerals(47.2). Study concluded that irula children in Pondicherry reported to have malnutrition in calories and minerals due to low family income. Gupta (1980) found that irulas energy intake was 1860cal, protein(50.3), minerals(35.5), fat(25). Santhosh et al(2012) in their study on social life of Irula women of Chengal pet, Tamil Nadu found that 13% of irula women completed high school education, 62% of women were illiterate. 61% got married at young age (<20 years), remarriages were common. Among 48% of the respondents age difference between husband and wife is above 10 years. Most of the irula women engage in agricultural work as coolie. 81% reported that they have habit of savings. 71% saved through self-help groups. Polyandry and polygamy prevailed in irulars of chengal pet. 78% of irula women reported they do not practice divorce. Bindu (2005) in her study found that Irular were an endogamous tribe in nature. Average family size of Irular is 3.15, the female sex ratio is 1000:966. 8.37% of the irulars were aged above 60 years. 64% of the Irula men 56% of irula women in Kerala were literates. Irular tribe has been reduced to the status of wage labourer under non-tribes. Chewing betel leaves were common among irula men and women. Smoking beedi is very common and regular use of alcohol is bourgeoning among irula men. Government development schemes were not reaching the Irula Tribes. Irulas possess rich knowledge about medicinal plants and its uses. It was observed that irulas' use 74 wild valuable plant species to treat diseases such as psoriasis, asthma, indigestion, diabetes, paralyze, genital disorders, snake & scorpion, dog bites, toothache, abortion, dysentery, swallon neck, cough, cold, headache, fever, high BP, stomach ache, rheumatism, leucorrhoea, jaundice, burns, cuts and wounds, dandruff, kidney stones, epilepsy, bone fracture, syphilis, STD, swelling, sprain, mouth ulcer, de-worming, nose bleeding, body heat, stomach ulcer, hair growth, throat infections, dehydration, vomiting, liver disease, ear pain, eye infections(Pradheep 2013; Rasingam 2012; Poongodi 2011). This knowledge usually transferred from generation to generation through word of mouth. Presently, there is gradual decline in the traditional healing practices among irula younger generation. There is an urgent need to document the irulas knowledge on ethnomedicinal practices.



With a grant from the Department of Science and Technology, Rom conducted a pilot study in the mid-1980s, to prove the cost effectiveness of employing the Irula as rodent pest controllers. In a short period of eight months, close to 1,000 Irula caught about 2,40,000 rats from 500 acres of farmland, and recovered five tonnes of grain. Rom estimated the Irula were 15 times more cost-effective than poison bites (Whitaker R, 1995). Census (2011) reported that there were no tribal populations in Pondicherry. Subramaniam & his team visited 150 villages in the four regions of the Pondicherry UT (Pondy, Karaikal, Yanam, Mahe) and collected ethnographic data which helped in identifying the tribes. It was found that Pondicherry, Karaikal and Yanam had tribal population, Mahe had none. Irula, Malaikuravan, Kattunayakan, Yerukula, Kuruman were the identified tribes live in 158 habitants of Pondicherry region. They reside in 63 villages in Bahour, Mannadipet, Nettapakkam, Villianur communes and Oulgarpet Municipality. With teams recommendation initially they were included in MBC category and later in 2010 these tribes were included in Backward Tribes in Gazette of Pondicherry and thereafter 1% reservation was made by Pondicherry Government for them in Group C and D posts and schemes operated under its government (La Gazette De L'Etat, 2010).

Irulars in Devathanam pet village, Gingee Taluk, Villupuram District, Tamilnadu speak Tamil dialect. They live in plains. Most of them reside in thatched huts. The family descent is patriarchal. Nuclear family is predominant them. Monogamy is the common form of marriage, presently they were engaged in agricultural labourers in paddy and ground nut cultivation and few migrated to Chennai for construction work. They worship all Hindu deities and their main family deity is 'Kannimar' (Kuladevatha). Practice of totemism and animism still exist among them. Irulars were socially, economically and politically backward. It is discouraging to note that their socio-economic living conditions have been marked by poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and lack of social and economic security. They are uncertain about their future. 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. It is in this context, an attempt was made to study the Living conditions of the Irular tribe Gingee Taluk, Villupuram District, Tamilnadu.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: Aim: To study the living conditions of the Irular tribes. Objectives: To find out the housing conditions, family, occupational, economic, community and social life and its problems. *Hypothesis:* Living conditions of the Irular would be poor. Study was descriptive in nature. Sample size; 44 households were surveyed and Semi-structured Interview schedule was used to collect data. Study population: Irular tribes. Universe: 28 irula families from Devathanam pet village, and 16 Irula families from Poonthamalli Village, Manalpaadi block (which is 6 km away from Devathanam pet) Gingee Taluk, Villupuram Dist, Tamil Nadu. Study was carried out in the year 2002. Data was collected from the adult family member available during the time of interview.

RESULTS:

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic details of the Irular tribes. Majority [60%] of the respondents were less than 45 years of age. Mean age of the respondents was 43. 73% of male were heads of their families. 70% of them have 4-5 members in their family. 70% were living as Joint family indicating their salient feature, 66% were illiterate showing their poor socio-economic conditions, only 5% of the Irular tribes reached high school level, the reasons given irulas for high school drop-out rate was being poverty, lack of interest in studies, no proper facilities, negative attitude and beliefs towards girl child education, no need education for domestic agricultural and construction work. Cent percent of them speak Tamil language.

Housing Conditions: 84% of the respondents housing conditions were inadequate and they live mud and thatched house. 82% of them were happy with existing housing conditions. All the houses have electricity facilities. Most of them have one-light service which is at free of cost under Tamil Nadu Government welfare scheme. According to 2011 census, in Villupuram District, 54% of the irular



housing condition were good, 44% livable and 2% dilapidated. It also reported that in Tami Nadu out of 23,116 tribal households 83% of have electricity facility, 15% use kerosene as their source of lighting, 96 households do not have electricity, only 8%(1892 households) of the tribal households have latrine facilities inside of their house premises. In this study, most of them do not have latrine facilities at home and almost all of them prefer open defecation. This is due to the socio-cultural practice prevailing in the village. During (2001-2006) Tamil Nadu government gave Rs.3000/- for constructing toilet facilities inside the premises of the house in all the villages. Irulas were not able to make use of this scheme. They have water hand pump and plastic water tank facilities for drinking water. All of them use firewood as their fuel for preparing food. In Vilupuram dist, 13% of tribes use Liquid Petroleum Gas, 1% Kerosene and 84% as firewood as their fuel for preparing food(Census 2011). In 2002, 33 households have got 3 cents of *patta* land and Rs.75000/- from government for constructing house.

Table 2: shows the Occupational & Economic life of the Irula Tribes. 54% involved in agricultural and building construction work, 63% of them face problems such as low income, long hours of work, job insecurity, 81% of them live under below poverty line, their mean wage is Rs1800 per month. Highest income earned by Irular Tribe Rs. 5000/- p.m through building construction. 60% dissatisfied with their occupational life. This finding is in concordance with Santhosh et al (2012) where they found that 37% of irula women of Chengalpet, Tamil Nadu were earning monthly Rs.2000-3000, 47% of them were earning monthly Rs.1000-2000. During the study period (2002) none of the irula people had banking facilities, mobile phone and Television, two wheelers and four-wheelers. But more than 40% the households had radio. During 2006-2011 period all irulas in devathanam pet village, got freebies of television set under fulfillment of election promise. 27.31% tribals in Vilupuram dist have banking facilities, 11% radio, 75%Tv, 5.86% computer, 48.84% mobile, 24.24% bicycle, 13.20% 2wheelers and 0.66% 4 wheelers(Census 2011).

Table 3: Shows the living condition of Irula Life: Family life of Irula Tribes: 50% of them had conflicts in the family often or sometimes. Reason for family conflicts is being attributed alcohol abuse and gambling. 82% of them were satisfied with their available family social support. Irulars tribes in this study had practice of arranged system of marriage, the interesting finding of this study they do not promote dowry, did not allow widow remarriage, and do not permit inter-caste marriage.

Social and community life of the Irular Tribes: 67% gave a positive response regarding their community life. This is understandable that the Irular community is well knit group and they live in harmony with surrounding village people. A significant 57% of them felt inferior in status when compared to other communities living there. This is again on negative indicator of poor living conditions of Irulars. 77% reported that they had arranged system of marriage. In earlier days Irulars had no system of arranged marriages. However, now-a-days due to the influence of nearby village community people the Irulars have slowly started practicing arranged system of marriage. Their partners are not related by consanguinity. Cent percent of the respondents said that they do not promote dowry, do not allow widow remarriage, did not permit inter caste marriage. Above mentioned positive indicators revealed that the Irulars living conditions is improved in their marriage life. 23% of the respondents were the members of their Irula Association led by 'Pazhangudi' Balu, in whole Villupuram district of Tamilnadu 60% participated in community activities. Remaining 40 per cent were unable to participate in community activities because they had migrated to nearby cities like Madras, Bangalore for working, earning their livelihood. 85% gave a negative response when they were asked about their satisfaction level of their political involvement.

DISCUSSION: The study found that only 34% were literates. Which is less when compared to average literacy rate for Tribes in Tamil Nadu was 41.53% and average literacy rate of tribes in India was 47.10% (Census, 2011). The average literacy rate of Villupuram District of TN is 72%. The highest literacy among tribes was reported in states Mizoram and Lakshadweep while the lowest was



observed in Bihar(28.17) and Uttar Pradesh(35.13). Gap in Literacy Rate was highest in Tamil Nadu in 1991 and 2001. When compared to average literacy rate in India among general population (80.33%) the literacy rate of tribal population was very low. In Jharkhand region very high majority (89% and 62%) of the tribal women and men were illiterate, 12% of men and 3% tribal women have completed their high school education. Very few (9% and 3%) tribal men and women had completed middle school(Sutapa, 2005). Seema et al (2008) found that 61% and 82.5% of tribal men & women were illiterate in the Mysore region of Karnataka. 61% of tribal women in Nilgris region of Tamilnadu were illiterate, remaining 23% were completed primary school, 12% finished middle school, 4% high school, 1%higher secondary and 03% graduation (Sathya S, 2006). Tribes living in Mualnuam region of Manipur recorded the highest literacy rate (70%) among tribals. Average male and female literacy rate in tribal concentrated districts of Assam is 31.5% and 22.5% respectively (Sonowal 2007). Literacy rate of men and women in Jharkhand and West Bengal together was 37% and 17% (Sudip, 2008). Dhurva (2013) reported that only 7% had completed middle school, one-third of them completed primary school, no one had completed high school education.

This is significant factor indicating their poor socio-economic and occupational living condition and backwardness of the Irular Tribes. In spite of Government schemes, reservations for the tribal community, not even a single respondent had reached high school level of education and got government job. It is very important to note that there were no schools nearby for higher secondary education, they have to travel nearly about 14 km for higher secondary education.

Though snake trapping is the traditional occupation of the Irular tribes only 7% of them sometimes engage in snake and snare trapping. With the ban on trading snake and its skins without any alternative rehabilitative measures their psychosocial aspects of life has been severely affected. Moreover Irular tribes in this place do not have a co-operative society through which they could promote their traditional occupation. Majority of the 80% respondents did not have the habit of saving, only 20% of them had savings which was promoted by women self-help groups. A large majority 91% of the respondents had petty loans for meeting their daily basic needs, these factors would have contributed to dissatisfaction in their occupational life. 64% of the respondents did not have concrete house to stay. Very large majority 98% of the respondents had electricity facility in their house. This may be due to the Tamilnadu government scheme to provide free one light service for tribals. 91% percent of them had proper drinking water facilities. These factors contributed to the satisfaction of their housing conditions.

Nearly half of the [46%] of the respondents children had dropped out from school and they go for work, start earning and become economically contributing member of the family. Poverty was the main reason drop out from school. Half of the respondents had conflicts in their family. This is understandable that significant number of the respondents said that family conflicts were secondary to the consumption of alcohol. Large majority of the respondents gave positive response regarding family support, which shows the strong emotional bond between the families. This is strong positive indicator of the living conditions of irulars with regard to their primary social support system.

Some common observations: The study found that their highest level of education is 8th standard. None of the households having toilet facilities, there are no public toilet facilities in whole village and most of the tribes in the present study go for open defecation. According to Census 2011, 72% of rural households do not have toilet facilities. In Karnataka; only one-third(29%) of the tribes have toilet facilities. Out of 44 households, except one household all others have taken land for lease for agriculture. Maximum land taken for lease was 4 acres. No one owned agriculture land. All households have electricity and television facilities. Men and women enjoy equal status and there was no female feticide and dowry system reported. Almost all of them follow Hindu religion.



Limitations: Study did not use any standardized scale to measure living conditions of irula tribes. When the study was carried out in 2001-2002 there were no published literatures in journals on irula. Later many ethnobotanical studies were carried out on irulars knowledge on herbal medicine. It took almost a decade for author to publish the article.

Suggestions and Future directions: Action research wing of the Tribal Welfare department, National Institute of Health and Family welfare, Tribal Research Institutes, and NGO's working for tribal communities can conduct further suitable studies to assess their needs and other psychosocial problems of Irular community and based on the findings of the study they can organize suitable rehabilitation programmes through local non-governmental organizations. There were no studies on psycho-social aspects, mental health needs, psychiatric morbidity, quality of life and community quality of life among tribes in general and irulars in particular, hence future studies can focus on above aspects.

CONCLUSION: From the study it was evident that majority of the Irulars' living conditions was marked by illiteracy, poverty, poor housing conditions, indebtedness; The study proves hypothesis that the living conditions and psychosocial aspects of Irular tribal community is poor. Above findings of the study are only a tip of the iceberg of the living conditions of Irulars and they need necessary psychosocial intervention and suitable alternative rehabilitation measures.

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ANNEXURE:

TABLE 1: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF IRULAR TRIBES

Sl. No	Profile of Irula Tribes	Domain	N	
			F	%
1	Gender	Male	32	73
		Female	12	27
2	Age	< 25	3	7
		26-35	11	25
		36-45	12	27
		46-55	8	18
		56-65	07	15
		> 65 years	03	8
3	Education	Illiterates	29	66
		Primary school	4	9
		Middle school	9	20
		High school	2	5
4	Occupation	Agriculture	19	43
		Construction work	8	21
		Snake trapping	3	7
		Casual labour	4	9
		Others	8	18
		Unemployed	2	5
5	Income in Rs	< 1000	23	52
		1000 – 2000	11	25
		2000 – 3000	5	11
		3000 – 4000	3	7
		5000 above	2	5
6	Family Type	Nuclear	11	25
		Joint	31	70
		Extended	2	5



7	No. of members in the family	Only 1 child	01	2
		2 children	02	5
		3	10	23
		4	22	49
		5 & above	9	21
8	Type of House	Thatched with Mud	38	86
		Concrete	6	14

TABLE2: OCCUPATIONAL PROFILE OF IRULAR

Sl. No	Occupational Profile	Categories	f	%
1	Working hours	6 - 8 hours	12	27
		8 - 10 hours	22	50
		> 10 hours	8	18
		Unemployed	2	05
2	Issues in occupational life	Low income	25	57
		Long hours of work	8	18
		Job insecurity	6	14
		Exploitation	3	07
		Poor working conditions	2	05
3	Indebtedness	< 500	3	07
		500 - 1000	7	16
		1000 - 1500	11	25
		1500 - 2000	18	41
		Above 2000	5	11
		No indebtedness	-	-
4	Main Source of borrowing	Neighbors	17	39
		Pawn broker	4	05
		Relatives	8	18
		Women SH Group	15	24
5	Main reasons for borrowing	Education	3	07
		Festival	6	14
		for daily needs	19	43
		Health	14	31

TABLE 3: LIVING CONDITIONS OF IRULA TRIBES

Sl. No	Satisfaction with Living Conditions	Level of Satisfaction	F	%
1	Occupational life	Highly satisfied	-	-
		Satisfied	18	40
		Dissatisfied	13	30
		Highly dissatisfied	13	30
2	Economic life	Highly satisfied	1	2
		Satisfied	16	36
		Dissatisfied	18	41
		Highly Dissatisfied	9	21
3	Housing conditions	Highly Satisfied	6	14
		Satisfied	30	68
		Dissatisfied	6	14



		Highly Dissatisfied	2	4
4	Family life	Highly Satisfied	18	41
		Satisfied	18	41
		Dissatisfied	7	15
		Highly Dissatisfied	1	3
5	Health life	Highly Satisfied	18	41
		Satisfied	25	57
		Dissatisfied	1	2
		Highly Dissatisfied	-	-
6	Social and community life	Highly Satisfied	-	-
		Satisfied	7	15
		Dissatisfied	11	25
		Highly Dissatisfied	26	60