

# Demographic Profile of Selected Irular Tribes of Coimbatore District – Tamil Nadu

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**Abstract-** India is a country which is best known for its culture and tradition. Tribal groups are homogeneous, culturally firm and they wish to survive in their own style. Irular tribes of Tamil Nadu occupy the second largest groups of tribes after the Badgas. They are situated at the base of the western ghat. The road which takes us to the village is undeveloped and rocky. The huts are little developed into houses with cement sheet. Unlike the earlier tribal people, 21st century tribes have normal dress code like other people. The major occupation of these tribal people is field work as farmers. Neither hospital nor any other medical facility is available within 15 Kms. There is a government school situated about three to four kilometers away from the village premises. When the girls attain their puberty, there will be seven days celebration at their houses. The marriage is not considered as an important custom of the villagers. Death is considered as an important ritual in this community. The irular tribes are mostly non vegetarians. It can be concluded that the tribal people of India need still more improvement in all walks of their lives.

**Index Terms-** Irular tribes, tribes, occupation, custom.

## I. INTRODUCTION

India is the home to a large number of indigenous people (tribal), who are still unaware of the lifestyle of the modern world. With more than 84.4 million tribes in the world, India has the largest population of the tribal people in the world. The tribal people constitute 8 percent of the total population of India. The term “tribe” means, a group of people who live at a particular place from time immemorial. Anthropologically the tribe is a system of social organization which includes several local groups- villages, districts on lineage and normally includes a common territory, a common language and a common culture, a common name, political system, simple economy, religion and belief, primitive law and own education system (India tribal belt, en.Wikipedia.org).

Irulars are one of the tribal groups of India. The second largest tribal group of Tamil Nadu is irulars. They are mainly situated in the lower slopes of Western ghat mountains which cover the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala present in South India. Their main occupations were snake and rat catching. They also work as labourers or coolies in the fields of the landlords during the sowing and harvesting seasons or in the rice mills. Irular is a Dravidian language spoken by irular tribes.

## Methods and materials

Irular tribes are the ancient tribal group living in the lower slopes of Western ghat mountain. The present study was conducted in the four irular tribal blocks of Western ghat mountain situated in Coimbatore district. The four tribal blocks selected were, namely Karamadai, Madhukkarai, Perianayakan palayam and Thondamuthur. The demographic profile of these tribal blocks were assessed through an interview cum personal observation by the investigator. The infra structures available for the tribals like network of roads, water and electricity, drainage facilities, hospital and school facilities were observed and recorded by the investigator during her visits to these tribal areas. Apart from the observation, she created a rapport with the local tribal heads and women and gathered information through personal interview regarding their customs and traditions followed during various occasions in their life cycle.

## Results and discussions

### Village condition

The Western Ghat mountain ranges cover a part of Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, South India, which is situated on Western Ghat's eastern slopes. Mullankkad, Madakkad, Anaikatti, Sadivayal, Thanikandi and Mutathuvayal are some of the villages in these forest slopes. In these villages ancient tribal people are living in small groups. They belong to Irular tribal community which is listed under “Scheduled Tribe (ST)” by the Government of India.

The road connected to the village was undeveloped and rocky. It was very difficult for two wheelers and four wheelers to move on this road. The tribes used to walk within the villages to carry out their day to day activities and they have to come to the outskirts of the villages to board the buses which connects to nearest town. The buses were flying for every one hour. The following photograph shows the road from bus stop to the village.



**Figure 1: Road from bus stop to the village**

**II. HOUSING PATTERN**

In the olden days, these tribes possessed *thatched house with a roof made of straw or reeds with narrow entrance*. The side



**Figure 2 : Old thatched house of tribes and present view of the developed streets and houses**

There was no provision for keeping the cooking gas, accommodate the cooking vessels and provisions in the kitchen. Similarly, there was no provision for washrooms and toilets inside the houses. Among the surveyed families 11.7 percent were using the common toilets provided by the Government and the remaining 88.3 percent of families were using open forest

walls of the houses were made of palm groove and in the present phenomena, among the surveyed samples 51.6 percent had tiled houses, 24.3 percent had huts, 12.4 percent possessed cement sheets and 11.7 percent had reinforced cement houses. As indicated above 11.7 percent possessed reinforced cement houses, allotted by the Government of Tamil Nadu. These houses had a proper ceiling, but inside the houses were not planned properly and had only one partition wall to separate the kitchen from the main front portion. The following table and photograph depicts the types of houses of irular tribes.

**Table 1: Types of houses**

| Types of houses   | Number     | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Tiled house       | 270        | 51.6       |
| Cement sheets     | 65         | 12.4       |
| Huts              | 127        | 24.3       |
| Reinforced cement | 61         | 11.7       |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>523</b> | <b>100</b> |



areas for their toilet routines. These tribes used stagnant rain waters or forest river waters for cleaning after their toilet routines. Similarly, there was no provision for washing clothes except a small enclosed area outside the houses.



**Figure 3: Overview of the houses and kitchen**



**Figure 4: View of the place used for washing clothes and open gutter used as toilets**

### III. SOURCE OF INCOME

The ancestors of the tribal families survived as a professional snake and rat catchers. But over these years of existence these tribes were unable to find sustainable occupation for themselves because they are unskilled in doing any kind of job. They earn their living by doing “coolie work”, as agricultural labourers in the field of the land lords.

The major occupation of surveyed tribes were farming. They cultivate maize, corn, ragi and ground nuts. There were one or two petty shops through which they earned a small income. Apart from these petty shops, one Government ration shop was available for the tribes to buy their grocery items at the subsidized rates. The cattle and poultry rearing were common among irular tribes. Among the surveyed samples, 70 percent of the tribal family were rearing cows, goats and hen in their houses and earning extra income through selling milk, milk products, eggs and meat.



**Figure 5 :Agricultural Fields**



**Figure 6: Glimpse of petty shop and ration store in the irular tribal villages**

#### IV. WATER AND ELECTRICITY FACILITIES

There were normally four to five drinking water taps available for the whole village consisting of 170 – 200 families. These families had to collect their water for drinking and cooking from these taps only. The drinking water from these taps was available for three to four hours once in three days. Majority ( 94.3 percent ) of irular tribal families were using this above said

tap water for drinking. Water from other forest rivers was used for bathing and washing clothes. During monsoon seasons forest rivers will normally be flooded and the survey revealed that 3.6 percent of irular tribes use forest river water for drinking and 36 percent of people collect rain water in vessels for various purposes. Table explains the usage of rain water by the irular tribal families.



**Figure 7 :Drinking water tap and Forest river**

**Table 2 : Mode of usage of rain water by the irular tribal families**

| Usage           | Number     | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Drinking        | 11         | 2.4        |
| Cooking         | 12         | 2.6        |
| Bathing         | 19         | 4.2        |
| Washing vessels | 176        | 38.9       |
| Washing clothes | 92         | 20.3       |
| Watering plants | 143        | 31.6       |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>453</b> | <b>100</b> |

Among the 523 irular tribal families surveyed, only 453 families were collecting rain water. In that, 38.9 percent of the families were using rain water for washing vessels followed by 31.6 percent were using rain water for plants and 20.3 percent for washing clothes. A few families were using rain water for drinking, cooking, and bathing purposes.

As for as the supply of electricity to these irular tribal villages were concerned, there was no proper provision for electricity in these tribes' houses. The main electrical posts were normally installed at the fringes of villages to safe guard their agricultural fields and house holds from the entry of elephants from forest areas.



**Figure 8 :Electrical posts installed at the fringes of villages**

#### V. HOSPITAL AND OTHER HEALTH CARE FACILITIES

As far as the irulars were concerned, they believe in natural medical herbs and they consume fresh specific herbs or herbal medicines prepared at home using combination of herbs for

treating their illness and diseases. They also had certain traditional methods of curing their illness based on certain superstitious beliefs. There was no private hospitals, health care centers in the irular tribal villages. The tribal families had to travel 10 – 15 Kms to reach the Primary Health Care centers run by the government. The private trusts and foundations were used to conduct medical camps occasionally in these irular tribal areas as a part of their community welfare activities.

#### VI. EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Literacy is universally identified as a powerful instrument of social change. The level of literacy is one of the most important indicators of social change. Among the surveyed irular tribal families irrespective of the sex, elderly were illiterates, and adults had their education up to primary school level. But younger age groups (both boys and girls) were sent to tribal residential schools (plate ) located at a distance of three to five kilometers from the tribal hamlets. The tribal schools had from 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> standards and mid-day meal programme. Apart from mid-day meals, the tribal children were provided with break fast and dinner. The tribal children were provided with uniforms, books, notebooks, scales, pens and pencils. They were also provided with toiletries like soap, paste, toothpaste, tooth brush, slippers and sanitary napkins for adolescent girls. All these were provided by the tribal welfare department of Tamil Nadu government, to motivate tribal boys and girls to complete their school education till 10<sup>th</sup> standard. The tribal children have to join government schools in the neighboring city normally 7 kilometers away from their hamlets, if they are interested to complete 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standard education.



Figure 9 : View of the tribal school

## VII. CUSTOM AND CULTURE

As a part of the demographic profile of the tribes, it was thought of interest to collect information on the custom and culture of the irular tribes.

### a. Dress code

The tribal men wear cotton dhoti and shirts, women wear sarees but tied in their customary way with palloos tucked at the pleats, tucked in the front. Adolescent girls residing in the tribal schools wear salwars and half sarees.



Figure 10 : Investigator along with the tribal girls wearing saree tied in their customary way

### b. Puberty function

The women in any community reflects the custom and culture of that community. It is applicable to tribes like irulars. When a girl in the family attains her puberty, the family plans seven days celebrations. For the first 5 days, the girl was made to sit inside a small hut with a roof which was temporarily built by her maternal uncle. On the top of the roof there was a picture of clown to protect the girl from other evil eyes. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day midnight, the roof would be burnt and the girl would be made to jump outside. In this event, the burning of the roof signifies - the burning of evil and the jumping out signifies that the girl should jump out of all her evils and become as pure as the Goddess "Mother Sita".



**Figure 11 : View of the hut, clown and girl inside the hut**

**c. Marriage function**

Marriage is considered as a sacred and an important event in the life of any individual. Among the irular tribes, men or women were allowed to marry according to their wish and marrying more than one man or woman was not considered as a crime. Irular married women used to wear mangal sutra ( two black beads) in yellow thread. The married women were not allowed to participate in any of their community function if they were not wearing mangal sutras and along with the family members these women will be thrown out of their community and village. Dowry system (money given to the bride groom during the time of marriage by the bride's parents) was common among the irular tribes from the ancient times. During the earlier days, the dowry amount used to be Rs. 1.50 / -. But at the present time, the amount had increased to Rs. 1500 - 2000 /-.

**d. Delivery pattern**

Normally, delivery is considered to be the second birth for any woman. But as far as irular tribes were considered, deliveries were conducted at home with the help of a local old lady who had attended a number of deliveries in their tribal villages. The expectant mothers were allowed to under go labour pain and deliver their babies with heavy blood loss. The local lady, delivery attendant, would be called when the labor pain develops. She would pour little amount of castor oil in her left palm and touch it with the right hand fingers, at the same time uttering some words of prayers. The old lady delivery attendant would drop the castor oil and they have a superstitious belief that if the oil drops continuously, the delivery would be very easy for the expectant mother. On the other side, if the oil drops down in separate drops, the delivery would be very difficult. During the

time of data collection the irular women expressed that till today, deliveries are happening as per their belief.



**Figure 12 : The old lady who attends the delivery**

**e. Death ceremony**

Irular tribes were the people who celebrate death as one of their religious festivals. In spite of their age and sex, every one in the village would consume alcohol and they dance in front of the dead body. After that, they sing songs and would do the final rights with full happiness. As per their traditional belief, they were not supposed to cry in front of the dead body and the irular tribes strongly believe that there is life after death.



**Figure 13 : Tribal instruments used during different occasions.**

#### VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The demographic profile of the irular tribes resulted that , the irulars are virtually cut off from the main stream of society. They are totally ignorant about the happenings in the external world. This state of affair has to chane further.

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