The Irulas of South India: A Review of Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Identity, and Policy Gaps

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ABSTRACT:

The Irula tribe, transcendentally occupying the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, speaks to one of India's foremost marginalized and lesser-known Indigenous communities. This audit paper solidifies and analyzes existing writing on the Irula individuals' socio-cultural, financial, and environmental angles. Customarily known for their ability to catch wind and rodents, the Irulas have a wealth of ethnobiological information, especially in homegrown pharmaceutical and natural life following, which remains mainly under-documented. The survey investigates their conventional job honors, dialect, conviction frameworks, and advancing relationship with woodland environments. Besides, it analyses the effect of modernization, uprooting, and natural arrangements on their socio-economic status and social personality. Uncommon consideration is given to government mediations, instruction, healthcare access, and legitimate recognition, with a basic look at their effectiveness. The paper highlights the pressing requirement for socially delicate development programs, conservation of traditional information, and comprehensive policymaking to guarantee the feasible improvement and strengthening of the Irula community.

Keywords: Irula tribe, food habits, culture, and policymaking

Introduction

The Irula community, determining its title from the Tamil word Irula, which means haziness, dwells transcendently in areas like Tiruvallur, Kancheepuram, and Tiruvannamalai. With occupations primarily centered around wind and rodent catching, the Irula individuals have broad information about homegrown assets and vegetation.

The term Irula tribe alludes to a bunch of individuals who live in separate and unpolluted situations, that is, forests and mountains that are distant from the highly developed, modern civilization. They have a well-defined life with positive rules, ethics, traditions, conventions, dialects, and ways of worship. According to anthropology, the Tribe could be a framework of social affiliation comprising a common culture, title, dialect, basic economy, political framework, religion, convictions, and ancient law. The tribal individuals of India have been referred to as Adivasi, woodland tribes, slope tribes, indigenous tribes, primitive tribes, and indigenous individuals (animists) for centuries. In certain districts, the innate individuals are moreover alluded to as, to begin with, individuals, begin Countries, native or local individuals, or autochthonous individuals, as they are the primitive or most punctual known tenants of that locale, as compared to the bunches that have more as of late settled, possessed, or colonized the locale.

Planned tribes are considered the most helpless community within the state. The term Exception was to begin presented in the 90âs in the dialogue of Kerala Show. The exceptions are population groups cleared out of the space of public activity and the capability-building program. Among the Exceptions, the Planned castes and the planned tribes are generally marginalized communities. Tribal communities fall behind other communities in terms of achievement of wages, tutoring, prosperity, and other essentials for great community sustenance. Planned tribes are dispersed throughout the nation, separated from Pondicherry, Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, and Delhi. For a community to be distinguished as a scheduled tribe, it should fulfill the following criteria: primitive characteristics, special culture, the preoccupation of contact with the community at large, topographical division, and backwardness- social and financial. The tribes in Kerala shape an imperative portion of the full population and represent a component of society that is joined with our country's cultural blend.

The three tribes in the Attappadi range are Irula (84%), Muduga (10%) and Kurumba(06%). These three groups are customarily locked in agrarian purposes. The Irula tribe is the biggest of the three tribes in Attappadi. The education rate of tribes is, in fact, 38.62%. Most (over 80%)

tribal groups are below the poverty line. But there's no affiliation or closeness between tribes. Kurumbas are the foremost primitive, are still within the insides of woodland ranges, and are considered moving cultivators.

There are 36 bunches of STs in Tamil Nadu, out of which six tribal bunches, specifically (1) Todas, (2) Kotas, (3) Kurumbas, (4) Irulas, (5) Paniyas, and (6) Kattunayakas, are characterised as PVTGs by the Government of India, and they live primarily in and around the Nilgiris district.[3] When the

number of tribal individuals of certain groups diminishes or remains unaltered, they are called PVTGs. The rest of the tribal communities throughout the nation are called âdispersed tribes.

The Irula community is the second-largest tribal group in Tamil Nadu, and they, as a rule, live close to the mountains of the Western Ghats. The title âIrulaâ is inferred from the Tamil root word âIrulâ meaning the obscurity of night. This may allude to their dull skin or that all major customs were customarily performed in the dark at night.Irula, they call themselves Erlar or Poosari, though their neighbours call them Irulas, Eralollu, Pujari, and Shikari. Irulas talk the dialect âIrulaâ as the mother tongue of the Dravidian family. It is closely related to Tamil, Sholaga, Yerukala, and other forms of Tamil. The Irulas within the Nilgiris locale entirely practice endogamy. Endogamy may be a method of marriage or home where the marriage is performed within the same community; that is, the bride and groom must have a place in the same community, and their society is characterized as patriarchal.Trapping snakes and rats is the essential occupation of Irulas. They, moreover, consider angling to be their minor occupation.As the Government of India prohibited the act of catching snakes, the community of Irulas gave up the procurement of their clan and started working as an everyday laborer (coolies) within the areas of landowners amid the period of sowing and harvesting. Irulas have uncommon social and devout honors with the reverence of the Goddess Kanniamma.

Systematic review:

There is a lot of information about the Irula tribe and other tribes, but we still don't have a clear understanding or conclusion from past studies. It is essential to do a thorough review of the literature to gather, examine, and understand the information that is already available (Dakduk & GonzÃ¡lez, 2018). A literature review discusses many published articles on a specific topic or research area. This helps create a conversation about what is known about that topic (Davies & Francis, 2018). Hart (1998:198) says that "all kinds of research can improve from a careful look at existing studies." A quick look into the topic shows that no thorough review of research

on fear of crime and cybercrime has been done yet. A part of a systematic literature review is to create search plans to ensure that all critical research is included. The results of these searches will be carefully studied and analyzed (O'Brien & McGuckin, 2016). According to Hart (1998), there are three steps to gather the proper research. First, look closely at the sources. Next, these sources will be used to find initial studies. Finally, evaluate the literature that you have included.

Methods

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The incorporation criteria for this survey paper center on things that particularly look at the Irula tribe as the essential subject, emphasizing their socio-cultural, financial, well-being, educational, environmental, legal, or livelihood-related viewpoints. The papers distributed in English will guarantee openness and consistency in the examination. Investigation must relate to the Irula populace in India, especially in locales such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, where the Tribe is overwhelmingly found. Qualified sources include peer- reviewed journal articles, books, scholarly theses, government and NGO reports, and subjective and quantitative experimental studies. Whereas there's no strict time outline for consideration, research will be given within the final 20 years to preserve pertinence. Ponders will be avoided if they, as it were, say the Irula tribe unexpectedly without making them the central center or if they primarily address cybercrime or fear of wrongdoing that don't straightforwardly relate to the Irula community. Also, distributions not accessible in English will be prohibited from the survey.

This look string was connected to four diverse databases. That comes about from two databases (Criminology Collection and Google Researcher) are basically utilized for the audit since the remaining two databases (PsycINFO and Sociological abstracts) are generally brought about in copies. Other than the database look, the references of the articles were inspected, and this come about in more articles.

After the look string was connected to the distinctive databases, and it was controlled for dialects and copies, the writing was reviewed to see whether it ought to be included or avoided within the audit. Evaluation is based on the theoretical framework and catchphrases of the articles. The test group of the think about and the most subject of the ponder were inspected to survey the articles. For example, it considers that it connected fear of crime to cybercrime but

had media representations as the most subject (Wall, 2008a), which were prohibited. Moreover, articles can be banned after the total content has been appraised.

The look included all articles without a time allotment; in any case, the articles contained within the audit are from 2008 and afterwards. This recommends, as assumed, that it may be a moderately later and understudied research area. Moreover, no refinement was made between subjective or quantitative considerations, but all considerations used a quantitative strategy, and two explorative considerations were included within the audit (Henson et al., 2013; Yu, 2014). The findings will be displayed beginning with the methodological approach within the fear of online wrongdoing considerations included in this audit.
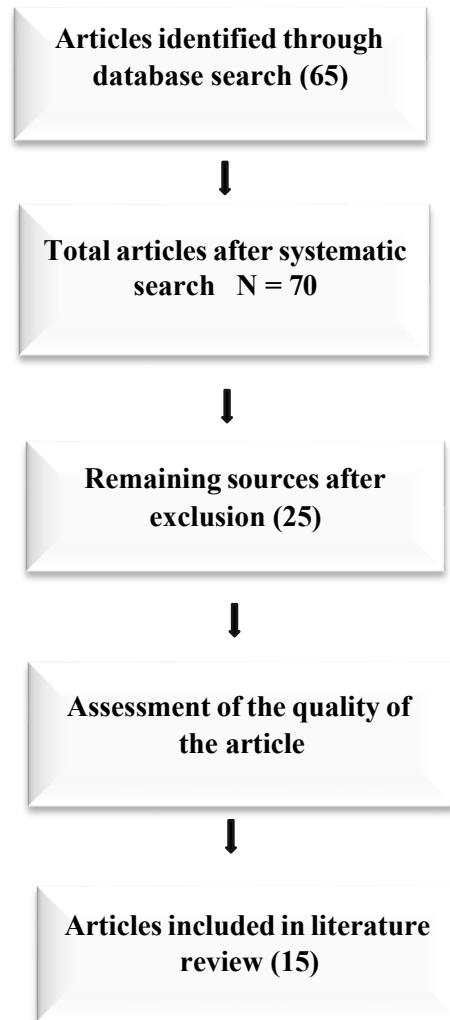
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Figure 1: Flowchart systematic search

Summary of key findings:

Author	Country of origin	Year	Key findings
Poonam Gandhi	India	2015	Despite ambiguities in their ethnolinguistic classification, internal regional differentiation is evident— particularly exemplified by the Malana:du or Malade:sa Irulas of the southern Nilgiri slopes— highlighting the community's cultural diversity and localized identities
S Atul Dayanand	India	2016	LearnIrula App that mobile- assisted language learning (MALL) tools can effectively support the revitalization of endangered languages like Irula in Tamil Nadu

Madhula R	India	2024	The research calls for intersectional, participatory approaches and culturally responsive policies to address the specific vulnerabilities of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) like the Irulas, promoting social justice and sustainable development.
Kasi E	India	2025	Death rituals of Irula Community ceremonies such as Cheers and Kanji Seeru.
Author	**Country of origin**	**Year**	**Key findings**
Preemy P Thachil	India	2016	Critical analysis of the socio economic vulnerabilities among Irula
Ashifa K M	India	2015	Assessing the social conditions of elderly people among the Irulatribal communities in Tamil Nadu. Challenges faced by elderly people of tribal community.
Lakshmi	India	2022	That home-based (domiciliary) deliveries remain prevalent among the Irula tribe in Tamil Nadu, despite the presence of institutional healthcare and government maternal health schemes
Bala Murali Krishna and Prathiba	India	2016	Identifies systemic challenges affecting Irula middle adolescent students in Kunjapanai and Anakati, Coimbatore, across six key areas: school curriculum, limited parental involvement, inadequate access to sports and sanitation, low levels of awareness, and exposure to abuse

Table 1: Summary of key findings

Discussion

The Irula tribe is an indigenous community primarily inhabiting the Nilgiri mountain ranges that span the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. It situates the Irulars within the broader framework of India's aboriginal populations, tracing their ancestry to pre-Dravidian origins. Although their precise ethnolinguistic affiliations remain ambiguous, the Irulars represent a significant cultural group with deep historical roots in the region. The specific reference to the Malana: du or Malade:sa Irulas of the southern Nilgiri slopes reflects the internal regional differentiation within the community (Gandhi, 2015).

The study by S. Arul Dayanand presents a significant intervention in language preservation through designing and deploying the LearnIrula App, a mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tool aimed at revitalising the endangered Irula language in Tamil Nadu, India. The study also addresses the socio-cultural reception of technological interventions. The generally favorable community attitudes towards the app underscore the potential of technology not only as a linguistic tool but also as a medium for cultural affirmation. However, the study implicitly indicates the need for sustained community engagement and digital infrastructure to ensure long-term efficacy and accessibility. Overall, this research contributes meaningfully to applied linguistics and digital humanities by demonstrating that when thoughtfully designed and culturally embedded, technology can play a transformative role in language revitalization efforts. It also provides a replicable model for similar initiatives targeting other endangered languages and marginalised communities worldwide.

The study addresses the socio-cultural context of the Irula tribe, situated within the broader framework of tribal populations in India, with a specific focus on Tamil Nadu. By examining the cultural practices of the Irula community, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of preserving Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of life. Cultural habits, including language, rituals, subsistence strategies, and social organisation, are vital aspects of group identity and serve as indicators of community resilience and agency. Understanding these practices in a localised context, such as the Coimbatore district, allows for more nuanced, bottom-up development strategies that are culturally informed and community. Overall, the study highlights the urgent need for intersectional and participatory research that recognizes the specific vulnerabilities of PVTGs like the Irulas while valorizing their cultural heritage. It also reinforces the role of culturally responsive policy frameworks in ensuring social justice and sustainable development for marginalised tribal populations.

The study by Kasi E. (2025) provides an in-depth ethnographic exploration of the death rituals of the Irula community, a Dravidian ethnic group primarily residing in the Nilgiri Mountains of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. As the fifth-largest tribal group in Kerala, the Irulas maintain a

distinct socio-cultural identity within the broader spectrum of South Indian indigenous communities. Like many tribal societies, the Irulas possess a unique set of cultural beliefs and ritualistic practices, particularly surrounding the liminal event of death, which they observe through ceremonies such as Cheeru and Kanji Seeru. These ceremonies underscore the community's relationship with death, not merely as an end of life, but as a socially and spiritually significant transition that reinforces communal bonds and ancestral reverence.

The study by Preemy P. Thachil provides a critical analysis of the socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by the Irula community, one of the most marginalized tribal groups in South India. The findings reflect a deeply entrenched cycle of poverty and social exclusion, wherein structural inequalities severely limit opportunities for upward mobility. The multidimensional challenges faced by the Irulas—ranging from poverty and malnutrition to systemic discrimination and lack of access to education and healthcare—highlight the cumulative impact of both historical marginalization and contemporary neglect.

The study by Ashifa K.M., titled "Assessing the Social Conditions of Elderly People Among Irula Tribal Communities in Tamil Nadu," critically explores the layered vulnerabilities experienced by elderly individuals within one of India's most marginalized tribal populations. By focusing on the Irula tribe, the study not only sheds light on a specific demographic often overlooked in policy and academic discourse—older people within tribal societies—but also amplifies the broader socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by aging individuals in marginalized communities. The research situates the plight of elderly Irulas within the intersecting contexts of ecological displacement, persistent poverty, and educational deprivation. These factors contribute to the systemic neglect and marginalization of elderly individuals who, due to age-related limitations and a lack of institutional support, are often unable to assert their rights or meet their basic needs.

Lakshmi's (2022) study offers an essential contribution to the understanding of maternal and child health (MCH) care within the cultural framework of the Irula tribe, one of the

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Tamil Nadu. One of the study's key findings is the prevalence of domiciliary (home-based) deliveries among the Irulas, despite the availability of institutional healthcare services and state-sponsored maternal health schemes. The research attributes this trend to a combination of cultural preferences, geographical inaccessibility, low levels of health literacy, and distrust or unfamiliarity with formal medical systems.

The study conducted by R. Balamurali Krishna and Dr. N. Prathiba (2016) provides a comprehensive assessment of the socio-educational status of middle adolescent school students from the Irula tribe residing in the hilly hamlets of Kunjapanai and Anakati in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu. Focusing on six key areas—school curriculum, parental involvement, sports, sanitation, awareness, and abuse—the research highlights several systemic challenges faced by these students.

Conclusion

The Irula tribe may be an exceptional inborn community, known not only for their conventional knowledge of snake-catching and woodland environment but also for their distinctive mental and nutritional habits. Their nourishment homes, closely tied to their characteristic environment, reflect a profound association with regular and locally accessible assets, which support their physical well-being and community holding. Mentally, their way of life cultivates solid social cohesion, strength, and a concordant relationship with nature, making a difference in adjusting to natural and social changes. Be that as it may, despite their wealthy social and environmental commitments, the Irulas confront critical challenges in terms of financial improvement and social consideration. Endeavors to protect their social character, whereas advancing instruction and well-being mindfulness are vital to enabling the Tribe and shielding their unique legacy.

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