WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Exploring the Cultural Identity of the Irula Community in the Nilgiris District through Emic-Etic Ethnography

Dr. Monisha M.[1], Dr. Naneetha. R[2], Dr. Vaishali Raj [3]

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur

ABSTRACT

Despite their status as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Irula community continues to suffer from systemic marginalization and deprivation. They are frequently excluded from basic infrastructure such as proper roads, electricity, clean drinking water, housing, burial grounds, and sanitation even when living on their ancestral lands Widespread poverty, nomadic lifestyles, and lack of land ownership force many into exploitative bonded labour in brick kilns and rice mills, perpetuating cycles of debt and illiteracy. Moreover, a significant number remain undocumented lacking Aadhaar, voter IDs, or ration cards effectively denying them access to government schemes, education, and healthcare. These intersecting challenges hinder their social cohesion, erode traditional livelihoods, and stall development prospects for the community. This ethnographic exploratory study investigates the cultural practices, social structures, and developmental challenges of the Irula community, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Tamil Nadu, India. Employing qualitative methods, including convenience and snowball sampling, the research captures both insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, the study aims to inform culturally sensitive development communication strategies that respect and integrate the Irulas unique cultural identity.

Introduction

The Irula people, a Dravidian tribal community, predominantly inhabit Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri and Coimbatore districts, with populations also in Kerala and Karnataka. Estimated at around 213,600 according to the 2011 census, they are officially recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), owing to their distinctive cultural heritage and socio-economic marginalization (Irula people, 2025). Traditionally, Irulas have earned a living through snake and rat catching—a profession embedded in both mythic and practical tradition—for helping control pests and supplying venom for antivenom production (Irula people, 2025). The formation of the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society (ISCICS) in 1978 transformed this ancient skill into a structured livelihood, allowing the community to supply up to 80 percent of India's snake venom to major antivenom manufacturers (Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society, 2025). Notably, community members Masi Sadaiyan and Vadivel Gopal received the Padma Shri in 2023 for their recognized service in public health and their exceptional snake-catching expertise (Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society, 2025; Masi Sadaiyan, 2025; Vadivel Gopal, 2025).

Moreover, Irula communities possess a deep reservoir of ethnobotanical knowledge. In Bolampatty Valley, for example, Irula healers documented 28 wild medicinal plant species across 23 botanical families used to treat conditions including snakebite, jaundice, dysentery, ulcers, inflammation, and diabetes (Kalaiselvan & Gopalan, 2014). Likewise, in the Palamalai Hills, 53 plant species spanning 32 families were utilized for treating skin diseases, respiratory illness, gastrointestinal disorders, and fever (Venkatachalapathi & Paulsamy, 2017). In Hasanur Hills, a survey identified 70 species from 42 families used by the Irulas for asthma, diabetes, and paralysis (Revathi & Parimelazhagan, 2010). Furthermore, an investigation in the Nilgiris between Chengal Combai and surrounding regions recorded 22 species across 17 families used for ailments like headaches, rheumatism, earache, body pain, and snakebite (Murugesan et al., 2005). In the Kodiakkarai Reserve Forest, consensus analysis of over 120 informants demonstrated strong agreement about plant use and utility, confirming the high reliability of traditional knowledge among the Irulas (Ragupathy & Newmaster, 2009).

Despite these strengths, the Irulas face profound contemporary challenges. Following the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act, which outlawed the snake-skin trade, their traditional income sources suffered, and although ISCICS restored some economic stability, bureaucratic quotas and delays frequently limit the cooperative's capacity and income (Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society, 2025). As younger generations pursue different livelihoods, there is increasing concern over the erosion of traditional skills and language—and the potential loss of their cultural identity. The Irula language, spoken by a dwindling number of approximately 12,000 individuals, is endangered as it is increasingly replaced by Tamil in daily communication and education (Irula people, 2025).

Furthermore, the Irula continue to face systemic marginalization and social exclusion. Incidents of caste-based discrimination, including denial of tribal status certificates and violence in regions such as Dharmapuri, highlight the persistence of structural inequities (Irula people, 2025). Limited access to healthcare, education, land rights, and government schemes compounds these vulnerabilities. Environmental disruptions—including deforestation and

severe weather events—displace communities and interrupt schooling, leading to rising school dropout rates among youth. Collectively, these interlinked issues hinder the preservation of cultural heritage and impede sustainable development, underscoring the urgent need for culturally nuanced, participatory development communication strategies.

Review of Literature

Previous research on the Irula community has approached their experience from diverse perspectives. A qualitative dissertation examining education in Attappady (encompassing Irula, Muduga, and Kurumba communities) found that despite decades of policy emphasis on inclusive education under Sustainable Development Goal 4, Irula youth continue to experience systemic exclusion. Ethnographic findings reveal that schooling often dismisses Indigenous knowledge and worldview, leading to disconnection from cultural identity and sustained marginalisation (Naivedya et al., 2023)

In Coimbatore, ethnomedicinal researchers documented the Irulas of Konbanur village in the Anaikatti Hills using 85 wild plants from 48 botanical families to treat conditions such as inflammation, ulcers, coughs, leprosy, and skin disorders (Ganesan, Manigandan, & Thirumaran, 2015). Likewise, earlier surveys in Coimbatore forests identified 25 plant species employed in healing rituals by Irula healers, many corroborated by modern pharmacology (Balasubramanian, Rajasekaran & Prasad, 1997). Moreover, Kumar et al. (2023) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with traditional healers in Dharmapuri, Kanchipuram, and Chengalpattu, uncovering culturally embedded practices for treating hepatitis, illuminating both their conceptualizations of illness and plant-based remedies (Kumar et al., 2023).

Further research focused on sustainable development interventions in villages such as Masinagudi and Ebbanad in the Nilgiri district. In that proposed study, Rajeevan et al. (2019) explored the potential of applying sustainable technologies—ranging from agroforestry to renewable energy—to address high dropout rates, nutritional deficiencies, unemployment, indebtedness, poor education, and environmental degradation in Irula settlements (Rajeevan et al., 2019). Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of engaging with Irula cultural systems in areas of education, health, medicinal knowledge, and sustainable development. However, despite such valuable contributions, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on domain-specific issues—education, health, ethnomedicine, or technology—without simultaneously capturing both emic and etic perspectives in a holistic narrative. Second, although ethnobotanical knowledge is richly documented, few studies contextualise it within broader development communication frameworks. Third, the voices of youth, women, and elders are seldom integrated in a single ethnographic design that explores intergenerational transmission of culture alongside external developmental pressures.

Therefore, the current study employs an ethnographic exploratory design to bridge these gaps by capturing lived experiences, cultural beliefs, and developmental aspirations across generations. It explicitly adopts both emic perspectives (insider views, including folk narratives, spiritual traditions, and local knowing) and etic perspectives (outsider analytical framing regarding socio-economic challenges and intervention needs). By using convenience and snowball sampling to engage diverse participants—elders, traditional healers, women, and youth—this research seeks to generate holistic, culturally grounded insights. Such an integrated approach enables informed development communication strategies that respect and build upon Irula cultural identities and knowledge systems, while addressing systemic challenges identified in prior literature.

Objectives of the Study

1. To document and analyse the traditional cultural practices, rituals, and social structures of the Irula community.
2. To identify the socio-economic challenges faced by the Irulas in the context of modernization and external interventions.
3. To develop culturally sensitive development communication strategies that align with the Irulas values and practices.

Research Methodology

The research adopts an ethnographic exploratory design, which is grounded in the tradition of cultural anthropology and centered on participant observation, interviews, and document analysis to explore cultural meanings in their natural context (Brewer, 2000). Through immersive engagement within the Irula community, the researcher will document rituals, everyday interactions, and environmental engagements to develop rich, contextually grounded interpretations of community life. Semi-structured interviews with elders, women, youth, and traditional healers, complemented by focus group discussions, will provide layered insights into communal beliefs, intergenerational dynamics, and the collective narrative of developmental aspirations. Document analysis of local records, reports, and previous studies will further triangulate observations and testimonies, providing broader socio-political and historical context to the fieldwork with the emic and etic approach.

The sampling strategy comprises convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling. Initially, the researcher will engage participants who are easily accessible and willing to participate, acknowledging the potential for sampling bias inherent in non-probability techniques. As rapport builds, snowball sampling will allow participants to refer others within their social networks, enabling outreach to more diverse voices within the community while maintaining trust. Though this approach may limit generalizability, it offers a cost-effective and contextually sensitive means to access hard-to-reach groups, promote participant validation, and achieve saturation in qualitative data collection.

An Emic approach

The Origin

The *lrula*, also known as *lrulas* or *Irular*, constitute a significant tribal group in Tamil Nadu. They are distributed across twelve districts, including the Nilgiris. The *lrula* are referred to by various names such as *lrular, Iruligaru, lruliga, Iruvan, Villiar, Kadu Poojari, Erilagaru, Iraligar, Irulan, Kasaba, Kasava, Kasuba, Ten Vanniya, Vana Palli*, and *Villaya*. The *Irula* people residing in the Nilgiris area prefer to identify as "*lrulas*." The term '*Irul*', meaning darkness in Tamil, originates from the name '*Irula*'. This could potentially allude to the individual's dark complexion. The Nilgiris District has three social divisions of *lrulas*: *Mudumars, Kasabas*, and *Urali lrulas*. *Mudumars* are located in the southern region of the Kotagiri base, *Kasabas* in the northern region of the Masinagudi base, and *Urali lrulas* in the Attapady base in Kerala. Irulas are categorised into seven exogamous groups known as "*kulams*", which govern their marital alliances.

Geographical settlement

Each of the three main settlements of Hallimoyar, Kallampalayam, and Thengumarahada, located in the lowland to the north-northeast of the Nilgiris ridge and near the Moyar River, is home to over one hundred *Irula* individuals. The British implemented measures to curb shifting agriculture, also called *kottukadu* or *kumri*, during the land settlement period in the 1880s. Consequently, the *Irula* community faced growing challenges in practising this farming technique. Kotagiri region is home to thirty-two localities containing five hundred and two individuals. Aracode, Samangkudal, Connorpadigai, Vaavayur, Kammaiyur, Karikkoor, Mallikuppa, Nadoor, Kandisankor, Bargoor, and many other villages are inhabited by *Irula* individuals. So, thus the current settlements for the *Irula* people include Kundha Kotagiri, Ooty, Meel Kotagiri, Keel Kotagiri, and Gudalur.

Village name

Irula people's houses are occasionally clustered into small villages. Each village will have around fifty to sixty hamlets in the Kotagiri taluk and twenty-five to thirty-five in Gudalur and Ooty taluks. Each village is called as "*Mottas"*.

Physical appearance

The *Irulas* exhibit a light brown to dark brown complexion, despite their initial dark-skinned appearance, characterised by narrow chests, thin bodies, and flabby muscles (refer appendix 2, pictorial data 1) for socio-economic and cultural factors.

Language

They communicate using the *Irula* language, a Dravidian language variety belonging to the Tamil-Malayalam and Kannada languages. The people in Gudalur and Kotagiri taluk speak a dialect mix of Kannada and Tamil. There is no script for this language; it can only be spoken. There is no written form of communication.

Table 1. 1. Relationship terms of *Irula* community

Relationship	**In *Irula* language**
Father	*Appa*
Mother	*Avvye*
Husband	*Aaala*
Wife	*Pendu*
Children	*Girl- Maga* *Boy- Manga*
Younger sister	*Thange*
Elder brother	*Anne*

Sentences and its meaning

Ithe vaavye, Okkave- Come and sit here

Nama pogila- we are not going

Neemu puttu thinthuriya - Did you eat

Irula song

Malakaadilye mada Mekka

Malakaadilye mada Mekka,

Nanaathu naadhini nanaathu naadhini

Gurapoo beika gurapoo beika

Jalapoo beika jalapoo beika

Jalapooneye soodinalye jalapooneye soodinalye

Kaadella gamanutha kaadella gamanutha

Meaning- Brother-in-law sings a song to sister-in-law asking her in the ground where cows are grazing. He asks that there are two flowers *Gurapoo* and *Jalapoo*, which one are you going to keep it in your head, if you keep any one the whole ground will have a sweet smell.

Occupation, employment and Income

The *Irula* people craft drums and wind instruments to preserve and engage in their musical heritage. The *Kota* people, who historically served as musicians in the upper Nilgiris, no longer fulfil this role. Consequently, the *Irula* people have become the primary musicians at *Badaga* and *Toda* funerals, as it aligns with their traditional occupation. The *Irulas* engage in hunting and honey collection activities. They gather wild fruits, plants, and roots for food. Furthermore, they collect beeswax, medications, gum, honey, and medicinal herbs.

The obtained products were exchanged with lowlanders for necessities like food and clothing, which constituted their main economic activity.

Currently, most *Irulas* are wage labourers in tea estates, while a few engage in agriculture on their lands. The *Irulas* residing in Kotagiri possess exceptional skills in crafting various items from bamboo. These include willow baskets, coiled baskets, handicrafts, carpets, rice beer mugs, Hukkas, musical instruments, floor mats, fishing equipment, and handles.

They sell these products to outsiders and earn their income. Individuals have received education and are employed in various occupations, such as farming, NGO coordinator, Ayurvedic healer, and daily wage labour. Their income levels range from Rs. 5000 to 12,000.

Household and Infrastructure

The house structures of *Irula* tribes will be lined up in rows, or a combination of the two. Before plantation owners began constructing "coolie lines" for their employees, it was customary to arrange buildings in rows. However, this arrangement became more prevalent once plantation owners began constructing rows for their workers. The dwellings in these coolie lines were arranged in lines for the convenience of the labourers. In most instances, government-provided homes are also arranged linearly. A courtyard is the most common addition for them, and houses in a hamlet are typically situated adjacent to one another with one or more courtyards. The current study was conducted in Kotagiri, Gudalur, and Ooty taluks, all of which had either their own or government-built houses. Very few residents of the Ooty taluk, Masinagudi Anaikatty region had attached restrooms and lavatories. All three-taluk residents have access to electricity and water facilities.

In contrast, the road infrastructure in all three taluks is inadequate. Transportation remains inaccessible or unavailable to the public. Two jeeps and pickups from the mainstream community assist with transportation in the Anaikatty region. Only one individual in the entire community possesses a two-wheeled vehicle. In Kotagiri taluk, the Solurmattam region lacks transportation and has limited road access. As these individuals reside deep within the forest, the distances that public transport can travel to reach them range from 10 to 20 kilometres. Neither primary healthcare facilities nor hospitals are available in the three taluks.

In Solurmattam and Anaikatty, there are first through fifth-grade primary classes. None of the three taluks has access to high school or postgraduate education. They must travel to Gudalur or Ooty for higher education, where they lack access to transportation and roads. Due to their locations, network and tower issues are always prevalent. However, regardless of the taluk, many people utilise the internet and media platforms for education and information gathering. The majority of people own a television and a mobile device.

Heath care and access to services

Kotagiri Solurmattam and Thengumarada residents rely on Mrs Kaliammal, an Ayurvedic healer, for various medical conditions. Mrs Kaliammal is particularly an expert in normal deliveries, and she has received a National level Award for her contributions to the field of Medicine. Due to limited access to hospitals and primary health centres, individuals must rely on private transportation in emergencies. The people have built a separate room for the women who are menstruating and for the ones who are attending the function. However, poor road conditions pose significant challenges for pregnant women. Due to limited road access and health centre availability, pregnant women residing in all three taluks are instructed to reach the hospital at least two weeks before their expected delivery date by the government health visitors.

The government facilitates by providing medical and financial assistance for pregnant women. The NGOs Keystone Foundation and NAWA play a significant role in monitoring the health status of individuals. The health issues commonly observed among the *Irula* tribes in the Nilgiris district include anaemia, high rates of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, underweight among preschool children, allergies and infections, low immunisation rates, consanguineous marriage, sickle cell disease, limited access and affordability of healthcare, insufficient healthcare personnel, inadequate hygiene and sanitation practises, and inadequate health-seeking behaviour (Dr Kalidas, NAWA, 2023). These diseases are widespread among the *Irula* population

across all taluks. They provide a monthly mobile clinic to monitor their health status. The limited accessibility of healthy foods from the forest has resulted in declining consumption, leading to poor health among individuals.

Social and family structure

The *Irulas* reside near one another, but there are no joint families. Everyone resides in a nuclear family (refer appendix 1, table 2). However, their kinship is quite endearing, as their unity is evident in every action they take, as observed by a researcher in the field.

The community leaders of the Anaikatty region are worshipped as God. They are known as "*Maniyakkara*" The Irula are an endogamous caste composed of twelve exogamous clans, (Maari, 2023) including *Devanan* or *Thevanan* or *Devala*, *Kalkatti*, *Koduvan* or *Kodugar*, *Kuppan* or *Koppilingam*, *Kurunagan*, *Ollaga*, *Peratha*, *Porigan*, *Pungan* or *Poongkaru*, *Samban* or *Chamban*, *Uppigan* or *Uppali*, and *Vellagai* or *Vellai*. They have extremely strong interpersonal ties (Vasantha, age 29, 2023; Jayamala, age 34, 2023) within the community.

Religion, God deities and beliefs

The *lrula* people exhibit some Hindu influences while maintaining their distinct religious practices. A priest from the *lrula* community performs rituals at the renowned Rangaswamy temple on Rangan Peak in the Nilgiris highland. Festivals are celebrated during the Tamil *Karthigai* month. The custom has been upheld for an extended period. They deeply respect deities like Mariamman, Ranganathar, Perumal, and Matheeswaran. Temples are concealed within the dense jungle. The temples are visited exclusively during the festival season, ensuring high privacy. The *Irula* people prefer the adoration of the Hindu deities Muneshwar and Maari. Muneshwar and Maari hold significant roles in Hinduism. The *Irula* community in Kallampalayam preserves a gilded picture of Mari and the associated ceremonial equipment in a nearby rock shelter. They believe the items are too sacred for any human-made structure. Maari God's connection to the land and its fertile plants is established through a sacrificial ritual involving blood-shedding.

The carved stone (Beliefs)

The stone is believed to have been owned by the ancestors of the *Irula* tribe. However, the tribe members are uncertain about the meaning of the carvings on the stone or the stories behind them. The area surrounding the settlement has been consistently protected, extending into the depths of the forest where the temple is located. Hence, it is believed that their forebears intentionally preserved it to serve as both a spiritual compass and a guide for future generations during their pilgrimage to the temple. In this culture, the belief is held that the stones possess divine qualities.

They are pantheistic and believe in spirits in living beings and inanimate objects.

The religious belief system frequently incorporates male and female principles as symbols of the ongoing creative process, highlighting the significance of sexuality. The *Irulas* are known to be followers of Vishnu. The temple, which belongs to Rangaswami, is dedicated to Ranga, also known as Vishnu (Ramesh, age 31, 2023). Consequently, they have garnered significant recognition for the temple. This mountain is located on the eastern slopes of the Nilgiris Mountains and is visible from various hamlets and villages in the *Irula* region. The *Irula* demonstrate a propensity for ancestor worship.

The *Irula* people in Tamil Nadu have historically worshipped *Maari*, who is revered as the goddess associated with smallpox. *Maari* is purportedly effective in preventing the disease. Ancient patrician spirits, known for their benevolence and protective nature, coexist with familial ancestor spirits. Ancestral spirits can be invoked for assistance, and the term used to describe this form of supplication is "*toga*." In addition, there exist wandering demonic spirits referred to as "*pe*," which have the potential to possess a human being. Priests must exercise utmost caution when encountering a "*kannipe*", a female demon believed to be a virgin (Maari, age 34, 2023). An *Irula* priest annually visits a temple near Garkiyur to attract a *kannipe*, who stays there for one month from October to November. Initially, she is enticed by a welcoming song, followed by an offering of vegetarian food on the second day. Finally, on the third day, she is enticed to come with a sacrificial offering of Asian deer meat (Vasantha, age 46, 2023).

The *Irula* people's participation in Hindu religious practises, such as attending Hindu temples, undertaking pilgrimages to Sabarimala in Kerala, and worshipping deities consistent with Hindu traditions, clearly indicate their engagement in polytheistic Hinduism.

Festivals

The Irula community residing in the villages of Anaikatty, Sirigiyur, and Vaalaithottam will get prepared to clean the vicinity of the temple and its access route in anticipation of a celebration scheduled for March 28th (Sathya, age 24, 2023). To facilitate the collective participation of residents from three villages in their traditional temple festival, they will organise themselves into groups and take turns cleaning the area collaboratively. This will ensure the cleanliness of the surroundings for the event. The community members of two or three groups utilise a pick-up vehicle to travel to the forest, where they remain for four to five days. The time spent in the forest ranges from four to five days. They pack all necessary items for the entire duration, including a two-day food supply. They will retrieve it from the jungle over the next two days. Preparing for the event is a customary tradition that they consistently follow.

The celebration will include members from the three constituent members of the village and individuals from non-tribal communities, who will be invited to participate in the event. Throughout the day, there will be processions involving a tiger statue, followed by the community's residents, particularly the young men, engaging in a rhythmic dance while handling the statue. After the priest "*Manookkaran*" completes the poojas, lunch will be served,

comprising biryani and white rice accompanied by sambar. Subsequently, individuals will disperse to their respective communal spaces the following morning. The festival honouring their gods and deities has been celebrated annually in the same manner. The people from Kotagiri taluk also celebrate the same festivals, and their traditional festivals are celebrated inside the forest.

Currently, they celebrate the *Maattu* Pongal festival in January, a significant Hindu festival that pays tribute to cows. Additionally, they participate in the yearly festival in Karamadai near Coimbatore, Sankaran Kovil in Thenkasi and Bokkapuram Kovil in Masinagudi during the Tamil month. The Kallampalaiyam festival, held annually for one week, is dedicated to honouring the God, *Maari*. It peaks on the full moon day of the Tamil month of *Aadi*. During this festival, chicken, goat, and sheep sacrifices are offered.

Food habits

Due to their dependence on the forest, their diet primarily comprises millets and plants. There is no necessity to procure vegetables and fruits from urban areas. They consume the fruits and vegetables present in the forest. Jebadhas (1989) documented that the *lrulas* gathered various natural resources such as wild fruits, plants, and roots to alleviate hunger. Additionally, they collected beeswax, medications, colours, gum, honey, and medicinal herbs. External sources of oil and salt are necessary. Locally sourced vegetables and fruits are readily available for cooking. External individuals also engage in the sale of groceries to residents. Foxtail millet, little millet, pearl millet, and Kodo millet are widely cultivated millet varieties in their respective regions (Sathya, age 25, 2023). They adhere to traditional dietary practices. Currently, government-imposed restrictions prevent individuals from accessing all forest produce products. The adoption of rice and vegetables as dietary staples has become prevalent, while the consumption or cultivation of millet-based products is now uncommon.

Music and Art

The *Irula* people produce their own drums and wind instruments for recreational music-making. The *Irulas* celebrate Mattu Pongal, and Kurumbalam is an art form associated with agricultural practices and performed during marriage functions. In addition, they engage in ritualistic dance and music during death ceremonies, which are performed in a circular formation by both genders. They possess diverse songs for different dance forms, including *Dunpattu*, *Odayooru*, *Thekkumala*, and *Valli Valli*.

The *Elelam Karady*, also referred to as the dance of bears, is a well-liked dance associated with bears' hunting customs (Kaali, age 36, 2023). This art form represents individuals' struggle against wild bears' encroachment on their natural environment. The *Irular* people commonly employ *Pori* (*Parai*) (a Maddalam-like instrument), *Peeki* (a wind instrument), and *Maram* (a drum-like instrument) for their traditional dances and songs.

Dressing and Ornament

Girls wear sarees or churidars, while boys opt for shirts and dhotis. There is no obligation to adhere to the customs or traditions of other cultures when it comes to dressing. Contemporary fashion has superseded traditional cultural attire as individuals increasingly prioritise modern clothing. In traditional gender norms, young girls wear shirts and skirts, while boys wear trousers and shirts. Married and older women wear nightgowns and sarees, while adult males and seniors in the community commonly wear shirts and coloured dhotis.

Marriage customs

In the *Irula* tribes, men and women were free to choose their spouses, and polygamy was not considered a punishable offence. Girls are married in the age between 12 and 18, while boys are married in the age between 14 and 24 in earlier days. Endogamy is practised within the *Irula* tribe, as individuals from the same clan refrain from intermarriage. Marriages are arranged by parents within the family if they do not choose a partner. The marriage ceremony is typically held in front of the home or a village temple. Formalising a marriage involves the groom tying a yellow rope, known as the *thali* or marital necklace, together with two black beads, symbolising the bride. No dowry system is followed. Very few still go deep into the forest and marry in their traditional temple, which is located deep into the forest.

Funeral rites

The announcement of an individual's death will be made known to all using their Musical instrument *Parai*. These communities attend death ceremonies where the deceased's body is placed in a traditional tent on a bamboo platform. The body is positioned with both legs drawn backwards and tied. The nearest kin obtain water from the tap. Water can be obtained by repeating the deceased person's name three times without turning one's head in either direction. A liquid mixture containing ground saffron or turmeric is applied to the body. Visitors drape a white dhoti over the body of deceased males and a coloured cloth over deceased females.

An Etic approach

The explicit culture depicts the *Irula* tribe's efforts to modernize while preserving their distinctive culture. Adopting modern dress as a means of social advancement is an example of community improvisation. This indicates that the *Irulas* are consciously adapting to the changing times and possibly

enhancing their socioeconomic standing. Barth's (2002) perspective on ethnic groups emphasizes the *Irulas* adaptability in religious practises and festival participation, demonstrating their willingness to interact with other cultures. This adaptability may result from the *Irulas* interaction with neighbouring communities or broader cultural transformations.

The external factors or genuine cultural preferences influenced the *Irulas*' adoption of distinct religious practices. The *Irulas* strive to educate their children despite inadequate infrastructure and limited opportunities. This shows their dedication to socioeconomic progress. Even as they implement some modern practices, their implicit culture persists, indicating a strong cultural identity. The variation in regional cultural adaptation, such as that observed in the Kargudi region, is influenced by distinct local factors and interactions. Overall, the implicit and explicit culture of the *Irulas* explains that their modernization efforts are intertwined with complex social, cultural, and historical factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Irula people of the Nilgiris district maintain a deeply-rooted pantheistic belief system in which ancestral spirits and deities particularly the cobra-associated goddess Kanniamma and the Sapta Matrika (seven mother goddesses) which play central roles in communal life (Irula people, 2025; Nagarajan Durai, 2023). Ancestor worship is embodied in the ritual erecting of sacred stones (natta kallu) at designated sites near their current settlements, often at the village edge, to honor the departed and maintain continuity between past and present generations. While they participate in mainstream Hindu festivals and temple ceremonies, these spiritual practices remain distinctively indigenous, guiding rituals tied to birth, marriage, death, puberty, and even animal sacrifice to ward off evil spirits (Vajiram & Ravi, 2025). Customary marriage practices follow patrilineal norms: cross-cousin unions and monogamy dominate, and cultural taboos around childbirth, tonsure rituals, and mourning are strictly observed.

Clothing within the community reflects both tradition and adaptation: men typically wear a short cloth around the waist with a towel over the shoulder, while women combine a wrap (thundu) with modern blouses. Their settlements—called *aral* or *motta*—consist of contiguous houses built using locally available materials and often situated on hillsides surrounded by gardens, dry fields, and forests. Infrastructure remains a pressing concern; in many Irula hamlets, basic road access is poor, resulting in school dropouts—ten schoolchildren in one village couldn't attend school for over three years due to impassable roads (Premkumar, 2023). Although government services exist in the district, remote terrain and inadequate local road networks severely limit access to health centers and schools.

Education for Irula children primarily depends on public schools, but innovative models like Vidya Vanam school in nearby Anaikatti cater specifically to tribal students through flexible, forest-based learning that respects indigenous ways of knowing. In media usage, traditional mass media has an expanding influence: nearly all households watch television and over 25% have DTH connections, and most families own a mobile phone with monthly usage of INR 200–500. However, internet access remains rare, and newspaper purchase though read by many is limited, as TV suffices for information. Notably, community-based platforms such as Radio Kotagiri and the Porivarai Workshop's Kwol radio are making a significant impact. Radio Kotagiri broadcasts in Irula, Toda, and Kota languages, sharing local stories, health information, prices of farm produce, legal rights, and traditional music all created by Irula youth journalists (Cultural Survival, 2024). The Porivarai space, constructed using traditional mud, bamboo, and grass building techniques, hosts youth-led music training, bamboo craftwork, agriculture, and the Kwol radio station, serving as a cultural hub that nurtures heritage and creates livelihood opportunities (The Nilgiris Foundation, 2023).

In conclusion, this study affirms that any development communication strategy aimed at the Irulas must privilege cultural authenticity, intergenerational exchange, and community-led structures. Scaling up education should not come at the expense of eroding traditional knowledge; instead, culturally sensitive curricula can bridge heritage with contemporary relevance. Similarly, infrastructure initiatives such as roads, healthcare, schools, and digital access must be co-designed with community consultations, ensuring service delivery is aligned with mobility patterns and ecological rhythms.

Moreover, reinforcing traditional economic models such as ISCICS-supported snake venom trade or forest product cooperatives alongside eco-friendly agriculture and ethnobotanical enterprises can provide sustainable income while safeguarding cultural autonomy. In this sense, development communication must become a co-narration a process of guiding shared futures that honour and amplify Irula voices, rather than overwriting them. Ultimately, by recognizing the primacy of community well-being measured through cultural cohesion, ecological embeddedness, and communal agency development efforts can support a flourishing future for the Irulas that is both progressive and self-determined.

References

1. Balasubramanian, P., Rajasekaran, A., & Prasad, S. N. (1997). Folk medicine of the Irulas of Coimbatore forests. *Ancient Science of Life*, 16(3).
2. Cultural Survival. (2024, February 7). *Irula-led community radio station in Nilgiris, India uplifts Indigenous voices*. Cultural Survival.
3. Durai, N. R. (2023, November 20). The Irula tribe of Tamil Nadu and their sacred stones. *VillageSquare*.
4. Ganesan, C. M., Manigandan, A., & Thirumaran, G. (2015). Ethnomedicinal approaches for treating various diseases by Irula tribals, Konbanur village, Anaikatti Hills, Coimbatore district. *Kongunadu Research Journal*, 2(2), 62–71.
5. Kalaiselvan, M., & Gopalan, R. (2014). Ethnobotanical studies on selected wild medicinal plants used by Irula tribes of Bolampatty Valley, Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Southern Western Ghats, India. *Asian Journal of Pharmaceutical and Clinical Research*, 7(Suppl 1), 22–26.

6. Kumar, D., Peter, R. M., Kaur, H., & Joseph, A. (2023). A qualitative study to explore the ethnomedicine practices towards hepatitis among the Irula traditional healers in Tamil Nadu, India. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 12(2), 371–375.

7. Mary, J. M. (2017). Impact of mass media on the culture and tradition of Irula tribe in Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu, India. In G. Lazar & K. Jose (Eds.), *Tribes of contemporary India: Concepts and contexts* (pp. 219–232). Omsons Publications.

8. Murugesan, M., Balasubramaniam, V., & Arthi, H. (2005). Ethno medical knowledge of plants used by Irula tribes, Chengal Combai, the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. *Ancient Science of Life*, 24(4), 179–182.

9. Nagarajan R. Durai. (2023, November 20). *The Irula tribe of Tamil Nadu and their sacred stones*. *VillageSquare*.

10. Poovazhagan, R., & Vijaya, P. (2024). Social development and biographical identities of tribal people in Nilgiri District. *International Journal of Science and Social Science Research*, 2(3), 311–315. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14834278

11. Premkumar, R. (2023, October 2). Without a proper road, 10 Adivasi children in the Nilgiris village drop out of school. *The Hindu*.

12. Ragupathy, S., & Newmaster, S. C. (2009). Valorizing the 'Irulas' traditional knowledge of medicinal plants in the Kodiakkarai Reserve Forest, India. *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, 5, Article 10.

13. Rajeevan, T. V., Rajendrakumar, S., Senthilkumar, T., Udhaya Kumar, S., & Subramaniam, P. (2019). Community development through sustainable technology—a proposed study with Irula tribe of Masinagudi and Ebbanad villages of Nilgiri district. In *Proceedings of ICTSCI 2019* (pp. 257–267). Springer Singapore.

14. Veliah, L., Geetha, R., & Venkatasubramanian, P. (2024). Wellness perception and spiritual wellness practices of women of the Irula tribe of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve, India. *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología*, 4, Article 1151. http://dx.doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt20241151

15. Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Irula people*. Retrieved July 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irula_people

16. Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society*. Retrieved July 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irula_Snake_Catchers%27_Industrial_Cooperative_Society