



# An Ethnographic Assessment On Cultural Habits Of Irula Tribes In Coimbatore

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## ABSTRACT

The tribes are one of the socially excluded groups living in our country. The total population of tribal people in the country accounts for about 8.9% of the total population. The Tribal population in Tamil Nadu accounts for 7,94,697 and constitutes 1.1 per cent of the population of the state according to the 2011 census. There are totally 36 different tribal groups live in the state and in which six of them are termed as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal groups (PVTG's) by the government with the purpose of enabling improvement in the conditions of life of people particularly those at low development indices. The Irula tribe, indigenous to Tamil Nadu, represents a unique cultural group with rich traditions and knowledge systems. This study presents an ethnographic assessment of the Irula community in the Coimbatore district, focusing on their social structures, belief systems, livelihood strategies, and the impact of modernization on their cultural practices. Utilizing qualitative methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, the research uncovers the dynamic interplay between tradition and change within the Irula society. The findings highlight the community's resilience and adaptability, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive development policies that respect and integrate indigenous knowledge systems.

**Key Words:** Irula tribes, Ethnography, and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

## INTRODUCTION

India is a country with large group of tribal people living and it accounts for a population of about 84 million those coming under 698 tribal communities. The tribes constitute 8.6 % of the total Indian population are repositories of diverse cultures, languages, and knowledge systems. Particularly Vulnerable Tribal groups (PVTG's) are the group of tribes whom are sub-classified from the Scheduled Tribe and are considered as more vulnerable than a regular Scheduled Tribe. PVTGs were earlier identified as Primitive Tribes and by the year 2006, the Government of India has changed their name with the purpose for better improving the living standards of endangered tribal groups based on priority. In Tamil Nadu, the tribal groups are classified into six particularly vulnerable tribal groups and those include Toda, Kota, Kurumba,

Irula, Paniyan and Kattunayakan. Irula tribe, primarily residing in Tamil Nadu, has garnered attention for their distinctive cultural practices and ecological knowledge. The term "Irula" is believed to derive from the Tamil word *irul*, meaning darkness, possibly referencing their traditional nocturnal activities or forest-dwelling nature (Newmaster et al., 2007). The Coimbatore district, located in the western part of Tamil Nadu, hosts a significant population of Irula communities. These communities have historically engaged in activities such as snake and rat catching, herbal medicine, and forest-based livelihoods. However, with increasing urbanization and environmental changes, the Irulas face challenges in preserving their cultural identity and traditional practices. This study aims to provide an in-depth ethnographic assessment of the Irula tribe in Coimbatore, exploring their social organization, belief systems, economic activities, and the transformations induced by external influences. By understanding these dynamics, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on indigenous cultures and the implications of modernization on traditional societies.

### **Social structure of the Irula tribe**

The social structure of the Irula tribe is characterized by its egalitarian nature and strong kinship ties. Traditionally, their society is organized into clans or extended families, with each clan tracing its lineage to a common ancestor. Kinship plays a crucial role in determining social roles, responsibilities, and interactions within the community. Elders hold significant respect and authority, serving as custodians of oral history, traditional knowledge, and cultural practices (Newmaster et al., 2007).

### **Economic Activities**

Traditionally, the Irulas have relied on forest resources for their livelihood, engaging in activities like honey collection, herbal medicine, and minor forest produce gathering. In recent times, many have shifted to wage labor, agriculture, and other forms of employment due to restrictions on forest access and environmental degradation (Venkatachalapathi and Paulsamy, 2017).

### **Impact of Modernization**

The encroachment of modernity has led to significant changes in Irula society. While some have benefited from improved access to education and healthcare, others face challenges such as loss of traditional knowledge, cultural erosion, and socio-economic marginalization. Studies emphasize the need for development policies that are inclusive and respectful of indigenous cultures (Ganesan et al., 2015).

### **Ritual Practices of Irula Tribes**

The rituals of Irula tribes include cultural expression which encompasses ceremonies of birth, adolescence, marriage, and death. Each ritual is marked by specific customs, songs, dances, and offerings that reflect their spiritual beliefs. Irulas also celebrate 'Pongal' festival by offering prayers to nature and the deities for endless harvest and prosperity. The traditional healing practice involves herbal medicines and rituals performed by shamans or traditional healers also play a vital role in Irula society. These practices underscore their holistic approach to healthcare, combining physical, psychological, and spiritual elements to maintain well-being within the community.

## Language of Irula Tribes

The cultural identity of Irula tribes exhibit a unique linguistic feature and dialectical variations across different regions and it belongs to Dravidian family. Language revitalization efforts are essential for safeguarding cultural heritage and fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge within the Irula community.

## Livelihood Strategies of Irula Tribes

The traditional economy of the Irula tribe is centered on hunting, gathering, agriculture, and small-scale animal husbandry. The rapid environmental changes, deforestation, and land-use transformations have posed challenges to the traditional livelihood practices of Irulars. It was identified that Irula tribes have diversified their livelihood strategies by engaging in wage labor, small businesses, or participation in government-sponsored welfare schemes. Efforts to promote sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and traditional handicrafts also contribute to economic resilience and cultural preservation within the community. The understanding and assessment of the cultural habits of tribal people provides invaluable insights into their way of life, traditions, and societal dynamics. Irula tribes are the indigenous tribes that stand out for its unique cultural practices and historical significance. The Irula community has established settlements and continues to maintain its cultural identity amidst urbanization and socio-economic changes. In the present study social structure, rituals, language, economy, and interactions with the modern world are examined with an aim to gain a better understanding on their cultural practices from early period and the way they preserve in the present scenario.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rao & Patel (2023) has analyzed the Environmental Sustainability and Livelihood Strategies among Irula Tribes in Coimbatore and identified the intersection of environmental sustainability and livelihood strategies among the Irula tribes. Studies document community-based conservation efforts, sustainable resource management practices, and adaptation strategies in response to environmental changes. Kumar & Sharma, (2022) examined the Conservation of Indigenous Knowledge among Irula Tribes: Challenges and Prospects and focused on the conservation of indigenous knowledge and language revitalization efforts among the Irula tribes highlight community-led initiatives and collaborative projects with researchers and local organizations. In this study efforts were made to preserve linguistic diversity, document traditional ecological knowledge, and promote intergenerational transmission of cultural practices. Scholarly works examining health and well-being practices among the Irula tribes highlight traditional healing methods, medicinal plant knowledge, and community health initiatives (Verma & Gupta, 2021). Research addressing cultural identity and resilience among the Irula tribes in modern contexts explores issues of cultural preservation, identity formation, and socio-economic challenges Mishra (2020). It was also analyzed the impact of globalization, urbanization, and policy interventions on indigenous communities, advocating for inclusive development approaches that respect cultural diversity. The Irulas are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in India, predominantly inhabiting the southern states, especially Tamil Nadu. Historically, they have been associated with forest-based occupations, including

hunting, gathering, and traditional medicine. Their expertise in snake and rat catching has been particularly noted, with their skills being utilized in various pest control programs (Revathi & Parimelazhagan, 2010).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to capture the lived experiences and cultural nuances of the Irula community in Coimbatore. Ethnography allows for an immersive understanding of social practices, beliefs, and transformations within the community.

### Data Collection Methods

- **Participant Observation:** The researcher spent extended periods in the communities, observing daily activities, rituals, and interactions.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members, including elders, women, youth, and local leaders.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Group discussions facilitated the exploration of collective memories, beliefs, and perceptions.
- **Document Analysis:** Review of existing literature, government reports, and community records provided contextual background

### Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of the study:

- To study the distribution of the Irula tribes in Coimbatore District
- To find out traditional cultural practices and rituals among the Irula tribes in Coimbatore.
- To analyze the social structure and kinship patterns within the Irula community.

### Inclusion Criteria:

- Individuals identifying as Irula tribe members residing in Coimbatore district.
- Participants willing to share their cultural practices, rituals, and traditional knowledge.
- Community leaders, elders, and individuals knowledgeable about Irula cultural heritage.

### Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals not belonging to the Irula tribe.
- Participants unwilling to participate in interviews or observations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides insights into the distribution of Irula tribes, cultural practices, rituals, social structure and kinship patterns of Irula tribes in Coimbatore. The following tables explain the major findings of the study.

**Table No 1: Taluk wise Distribution of Irula tribes in Coimbatore**

S.No	Taluk	Tribes in the Locality	Irula Population
1	Coimbatore North	Irular	1307
2	Mettupalayam	Irular	3087
3	Perur	Irular	987
4	Pollachi	Malasar, Malai Malasar, Mudhuvar, Kadar	Nil
5	Valparai	Mudhuvar, Kadar, Pulayar	Nil
<b>Total</b>			<b>5381</b>

The above table portrays the distribution of PVTGs in Coimbatore zone other than Nilgiris. Among the five taluks in Coimbatore, the Irula tribes are located in only three taluks and at different Blocks in each Taluk. It was identified that majority of Irula tribes in plains are located in Mettupalayam area (3087 Irulars) showing that the rate of migration is more in the places nearby Nilgiris, this is followed by Coimbatore North are with a population 1307 Irulars and this is followed by 987 tribes are found to be located in Perur Taluk.

**Table 2: Social Structure and Kinship Patterns among Irula Tribes**

Aspect	Description
<b>Social Organization</b>	Egalitarian society with clan-based structure; kinship ties are central.
<b>Kinship Systems</b>	Patrilineal descent; clans based on common ancestors; elders hold authority.
<b>Community Governance</b>	Decision-making through consensus; roles defined by age and experience.

The Irula tribes in Coimbatore exhibit a social structure characterized by egalitarianism and strong kinship ties. Clan-based organization and patrilineal descent contribute to social cohesion and collective decision-making within the community. Elders play crucial roles in preserving cultural traditions and maintaining social order, reflecting a deep-rooted respect for age and wisdom among the Irula.

**Table No 3: Cultural Practices and Rituals among Irula Tribes**

Aspect	Description
<b>Rituals</b>	Harvest festivals (e.g., Thai Pongal), coming-of-age ceremonies, ancestor veneration.
<b>Traditional Knowledge</b>	Herbal medicine, hunting techniques, folklore, oral histories.
<b>Art and Music</b>	Folk songs, dance forms (e.g., Kolattam), handicrafts (e.g., basket weaving).

Irula cultural practices and rituals play a pivotal role in maintaining community identity and spiritual beliefs. Festivals like Thai Pongal celebrate agricultural abundance, while ceremonies mark life transitions and honor ancestors. Traditional knowledge, including herbal medicine and hunting techniques, underscores the Irula's intimate relationship with nature. Art forms and handicrafts serve as expressions of cultural creativity and economic sustenance, reflecting their adaptability amidst changing socio-economic landscapes.

The ethnographic assessment reveals a community in transition, navigating the complexities of preserving cultural heritage amidst socio-economic changes. The Irulas demonstrate resilience and adaptability, integrating new practices while retaining core cultural values. However, the pressures of modernization, environmental degradation, and policy interventions pose challenges to their traditional way of life. Development initiatives must adopt a culturally sensitive approach, recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge systems and ensuring community participation in decision-making processes. Empowering the Irulas through education, sustainable livelihood opportunities, and cultural preservation programs can facilitate inclusive growth and social equity.

## CONCLUSION

Irulas are a tribal community living in different parts of Tamil Nadu. They are a recognized Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the Govt. of India. Culture significantly affects the conceptualization of the living patterns in society. Every social institution undergoes change with day to day with time and growth of social, economic and cultural condition. The cultural habits of the Irula people encompass a rich tapestry of traditions and practices deeply rooted in their history and environment. Key aspects include their distinctive language, traditional hunting techniques, unique folklore, and close-knit community structure. These cultural elements not only reflect their identity but also highlight the resilience and adaptability of the Irula in maintaining their heritage amidst modern influences. The Irula tribe of Coimbatore embodies a rich tapestry of cultural traditions, ecological knowledge, and social structures. This ethnographic study underscores the importance of understanding and valuing indigenous cultures in the face of modernization. By fostering inclusive policies and community-driven development, it is possible to support the Irulas in preserving their heritage while enhancing their socio-economic well-being.

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