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## Livelihood Strategies and Socio-Economic Challenges of the Irula Tribe: A Study in the Nilgiris Region of Tamil Nadu

**Mr Akash Pramoth L, MSW,NET, Assistant Professor, Department of Social work, PSG college of Arts and Science.**

**Dr S Kalaiselvan, Assistant Professor, Department of Social work, Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalyaya, Coimbatore.**

### Introduction

India has a large tribal population that is made up of around 84 million people living in 698 different tribal communities. Together, these tribes represent about 8.2% of the total population of India. The Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) form a part of the Scheduled Tribes, which were previously called "Primitive Tribes" until the Government of India changed the designation in 2006. These groups are especially marginalized and need to be the first ones to receive development interventions that will improve their socio-economic conditions.

In Tamil Nadu officially, six communities are under the label PVTGs: the Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Irula, Paniyan, and Kattunayakan. Among them, the present study places a special emphasis on the Irula tribe, particularly the ones living in and around the city of Coimbatore. The Irula communities in Coimbatore are either long-term residents who have lived there for several generations or have moved from the Nilgiri Hills. The cultural context of these urban-adjacent settlements is explored through the prism of their cultural practices and socio-economic status by the research.

Hunting, gathering, subsistence farming and small-scale livestock production have been the major areas of work of the Irula tribe in the past among the present-day economy. But deforestation and other environmental changes have affected these traditional methods of livelihoods to a very large extent. This winter, many Irula families have switched to wage labor, creating their own businesses, or enrolling in government welfare and livelihood programs as sources of income.

Sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and traditional crafts revival initiatives have been regarded as essential not only for the economic permanence but also for the cultural continuity. The study of the practices of the Irula community allows one to gain an in-depth understanding of their worldview, social organization, and resilience in adaptation. The Irula, one of the tribal communities of Tamil Nadu, have an abundance of things to share regarding their rich cultural historical background, and exceptional customs, and also their connection to the past. The urban expansion and socio-economic changes have been just a few of the factors that have affected the Irula settlements in such a way as to preserve their unique cultural identity, which continues to be very much alive.

A livelihood can be defined as the means every individual and family use to stay alive—comprising of their work, skills, assets (material and non-material), sources of income, and the ways of meeting their basic needs. It is a human welfare foundation and an ecological sustainability source for the humanity. At its core, livelihood is the human struggle to live a dignified life, which very often is represented by one's job, habits, and ability to support others. It is built on a combination of personal skills, physical and financial assets, and involvement in social and economic networks.

A livelihood is regarded as *\*sustainable\** when it not only permits people and communities to survive and recover from external shocks and disasters (for instance, hurricanes or falling market prices) but also manages to keep or even increase the worth of their assets and skills over time, and at the same time, does not harm or deplete the earth's resources (Chambers & Conway, 1991). The idea of livelihood is exceedingly abstract and complex; it is molded by a multitude of factors that are intertwined such as the social, economic, and political ones. To illustrate, industrialization, the condition of the market, land ownership, and government regulations are amongst the factors that can either provide or restrict opportunities for livelihood. Furthermore, the social conditions, such as the division of labor among the sexes, the dominance of certain religions, the presence of specific cultural practices, the kinship ties, and the quest for identity among different ethnic groups, obviously have a significant impact on who is allowed to access what resources and opportunities. Moreover, the type of social and political institutions—like governance systems, community leadership, decision-making processes, and prevailing norms concerning authority and participation—very much influence livelihood outcomes.

The rural poor and other economically disadvantaged groups usually have complex and varied livelihoods, relying on a mix of activities that include farming, the use of natural resources, local market participation wage labor, and small-scale production at home. In the same way, the urban poor often carry out different income-generating activities at the same time, by combining formal, informal, wage-based, and self-employed work. Livelihoods are mainly linked to the household, which is the main internal environment for them. The composition, structure, and characteristics of the household, such as size, age distribution, gender roles, and education levels, greatly influence the opportunities and limitations that arise.

One of the main strategies of living is still to rely on Agriculture, where the households act as the main unit of production and decision-making. Nevertheless, the resources and the assets needed for these kinds of livings such as land, labor, tools, and knowledge are present not only in the household but also in a larger external environment of livelihoods. The context that is external to the household both empowers and limits livelihoods—providing them with access to resources such as water, forests, credit, or markets on the one hand and imposing institutional, ecological, or policy-related barriers on the other. Livelihoods are the places of great social and economic interdependence where individuals or groups depend on each other for existence and development.

The most common ways of earning a living are growing crops, keeping livestock, fishing, working off the farm, and using the land through hunting, gathering, or artisan work. These activities demonstrate the power and skills of the rural and marginalized populations— even the destitute are equipped with some kind of wealth, especially natural capital, which consists of local environmental resources that are soil fertility, water supply, biological diversity, and good weather.

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## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As reported by the Times of India (2020), the area of Karamadai in Coimbatore is going to help around 300 Irula families by implementing sustainable livelihood programs, including a fruit crops plantation and small livestock rearing, over the next five years. The project is being supported by the Tribal Development Fund of NABARD with the goal of increasing the economic resilience and self-reliance of the Irula community.

Samuel (2022) portrays a broad picture of the systemic difficulties endured by Adivasi (tribal) people in India; he points out the fights for survival that still go on, the failures of government development assistance in the past, and differences in tribes' experiences across the geographical regions. The findings of the book show a sad condition in the country where a large part of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) are still living in chronic poverty which is often below the official poverty line and they have to deal with very malnourished, not very accessible healthcare, and very high illiteracy rates. The research works highlight the urgent necessity for government to put in more effort, be responsible, and have a long-term vision while planning and executing tribal development programs that will genuinely benefit the people.

Rao and Patel (2023) conducted a study on the Environmental Sustainability and Livelihood Strategies of Irula Tribes in Coimbatore and pinpointed the crossover between environmental sustainability and the livelihood strategies of the Irula tribes. The discoveries of the studies reveal the spectrum of community-based conservation efforts, resource management practices that are sustainable and even adaptation strategies as studies in the area changes the environment.

## METHODOLOGY

The present research has as its sample members of the Irula community of Kothagiri, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. The said sample comprises of 100 individuals of the Irula tribe who are involved in different sorts of livelihood activities. Randomly, the researcher has selected participants aged from 15 to 60 years from the total population.

A self-structured questionnaire served as the instrument for data collection. The participants were asked questions related to family support for their livelihood, the reasons for looking for employment or livelihood outside Tamil Nadu, the need for improvement of the region's livelihood infrastructure and facilities, their opinion on government livelihood support and welfare programs, skill development training, income sources, job preferences, and problems in keeping their livelihoods.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The paper displays the results and the interpretation of the data collected to assess the level of respondents' awareness, accessibility, and perceived benefits of the services provided by the three institutions, LAMPS, DADW and PUTG. For the purpose of analyzing the data, descriptive statistical techniques were employed which included frequency distributions as well as percentages to clarify the response patterns in relation to the major variables. The results are displayed in tables that adhere to the APA guidelines thus ensuring both clarity and systematic interpretation at the same time.

The study covers major aspects such as public knowledge of institutional services, financial and agricultural support access, educational and welfare schemes provided, and the opinions about the conservation of indigenous knowledge. The outcomes have not only asserted the degree of the beneficiary population that these institutional support systems have reached but also identified the shortcomings in the delivery of services. The explanation of the findings is provided alongside each table with the intention to create a clear relationship between the empirical data and the study's aims

thereby promoting a full understanding of the institutions' effectiveness in supporting the tribes' livelihoods.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	57	54.81%
Female	47	45.19%
Total	104	100%

Table 1 presents the gender distribution of the respondents.

Based on the demographic analysis, it is found that 54.81% are males and 45.19% are females of the total respondents. The significant number of female respondents indicates that they are not only participating in livelihood activities but also taking part in the household economic decision making within tribal communities. This gender distribution implies that there is a fairly equal participation of both genders in the activities and decisions regarding livelihood and economic governance at the household level.

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
18-25	13	12.50%
26-35	15	14.42%
36-45	26	25.00%
46-60	33	31.73%
Total	104	100%

Table 2 presents the age distribution of the respondents.

The age distribution shows that most of the respondents (56.73%) fall in the age group of 36-60 years, which means the middle-aged and older adults are mainly in charge of the livelihood activities. The lower number of younger respondents can be interpreted as lack of interest from the youth side in the sustainable livelihood opportunities. This demographic feature is important to be considered because if the participation of youth is not properly managed, it may lead to challenges of livelihood sustainability and intergenerational turnover.

Source of Income	Frequency	Percentage
Seasonal migration	19	18.27%
Wage employment (MGNREGA/Others)	15	14.42%
Livestock rearing	14	13.46%
Agricultural labour (Other's land)	12	11.54%
Pension schemes	11	10.58%
Artisan/Craft work	11	10.58%
Agriculture (Own land)	10	9.62%
Daily wage (non-farm)	8	7.69%
Small business	4	3.85%
Total	104	100%

Table 3 presents the primary sources of income among the respondents.

The results show that the livelihoods of the tribes are very diverse but at the same time are economically insecure. The largest portion of the participants (18.27%) rely on seasonal migration, followed by wage labor and livestock raising. A mere 9.62% depend on agriculture from their own land, this suggests a very restricted land ownership. The small fraction of small business points to the fact that there are very limited entrepreneurial opportunities in the tribal households.

Satisfaction Level	Frequency	Percentage
Not Satisfied	30	28.85%
Less Satisfied	27	25.96%
Satisfied	22	21.15%
Highly Satisfied	25	24.04%
Total	104	100%

Table 4 presents the respondents' satisfaction levels with healthcare facilities.

More than half of the people surveyed, specifically 54%, expressed their dissatisfaction with the current healthcare facilities. This was mainly because of poor accessibility, poor infrastructure and poor quality of service in tribal areas which were still very significant. The lack of healthcare facilities has a direct consequence on the livelihood and well-being of the people since health problems can prevent workers from being employed, lower the amount of money brought in by the tribe, and make it hard for the households in the tribe to come out of poverty, which is a cycle.

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	51.92%
No	50	48.08%
Total	104	100%

Table 5 presents the respondents' awareness of TNRTP (Tamil Nadu Rural Transformation Project).

Even though 51.92% of the people who answered to the survey are aware of the TNRTP scheme, a large part (48.08%) still doesn't know about the program. This means that there is still a lot of work to be done regarding information delivery and outreach. The lack of awareness hampers the government's livelihood support programs from being used effectively and thus their lesser impact in tribal communities.

Awareness of LAMPS	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	51.9%
No	50	48.1%
Total	104	100%

Table 6 presents the respondents' awareness of LAMPS.

Based on the survey results, it was revealed that awareness of LAMPS existed among 51.9% of the respondents, but at the same time, a large portion of 48.1% was unaware of the initiative. This almost equal split indicates that the awareness is at a moderate level, but it also points to the low outreach that has been conducted, which might limit the program's penetration and effectiveness in the tribal community.

Perceived Support	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	46	44.2%
No	58	55.8%
Total	104	100%

Table 7 presents the respondents' perceptions of PUTG support in preserving indigenous knowledge.

The results indicate that PUTG's backing for the safeguarding of native knowledge is inadequate from the point of view of 55.8% respondents. This commonly held view brings to light a significant flaw in the program, and thus, the preservation of indigenous knowledge is dubbed as one of the problems requiring the intervention of policy and funding measures to be solved.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, although LAMPS, DADW, and PUTG have contributed to the economic upliftment of the tribal populations, their impact has been limited and irregular. The study recommends the adoption of a set of strategic policy measures that include, among others, the institution of awareness campaigns, the removal of access hurdles, and the establishment of a more equitable distribution of benefits along with increased community participation. The effectiveness of the

institutions should be maximized and this can only happen by taking the full and fair reach-out to the intended beneficiaries of the support systems through the bridging of these gaps.

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