Description of Irulars
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Irulars

Among the ethnic groups, Irulars are biologically isolated endogamous tribe with excellent medicobotanical knowledge. They form a refugee group whose ancestors moved from the lowlands because of cultural pressures exerted by neighbouring settlers. The name Irula is supposed to have come from the Tamil word, “Mudumars” (Southern irulars), “Kasabas” (Northern Irulars) and Ural Irulars, they are found mainly in the Southern and Eastern steep slopes of the Nilgiris. They are divided into six exogamous divisions called “Kulams” such as Doongkara, Kudagar (people of Coorg) Kalkatti (those who tie stone), Deval and Kuppilingam.

Irulars are usually short or below medium height; strong with a broad nose and a moderate clim. Curly hair, broadened lower lip, darker in colour are the characteristic features of Irulas (Thurston, E. 1909).

Women wear red sarees and they wear rings and ear rings made of silver. They start working before sunrise, after having their breakfast they go to work by seven in the morning. They return back by eight or nine. Till that they have fruits, coffee as their food. Both men and women don’t keep flowers in their hair.

Their huts are made from bamboo, twigs and wood. To accompany the guests a small elevated portions are build the huts are facing towards east. The huts are build in such a way that they are strong and can withstand
wind and rain. There are atties and separate places to burn wood in winter season. Irulas pronounce these huts as 'Khure'.

The marriage ceremony is a simple affair. They select girls for the marriage, who are good at work. Marriage are mostly done at the months of May, June, July, August and days of Monday and Wednesday. Bridegroom must be eighteen years old and the bride after ten days after puberty are eligible for the marriage. A feast is to be held, the guest, present a few rupees to the bridegroom, who ties up the money in a cloth, and going to the bride's hut, contacts her to future home. In marriage, bride wears saree, along with silver jewels when widows are married, their children, who were born to the first husband are left to the grand parents.

A man can marry more than one wife. Widows are permitted to marry again. After marriage if the couple have dislikes they can divorce and get married to an other person. Sometimes girls get married before puberty; Girls die as she gets two children before she attains the age of fourteen due to some diseases and general weakness.

When a baby is born they keep it on the *Ricinus communis* leaf for 2 days. Then clean the baby and keep the baby in the dried leaf sheath of banana. They keep names to the children in the sixth day, if the child is a girl, normally they keep the name of the grand parents. After the function is over, they celebrate it by having meat in the food. They use coal from certain trees to make their teeth black. Married women keep bindi in their forehead. Mothers inscribe tattoo to their daughters by singing, in foreheads and in the body.
There is a special value for the number twelve, when a baby is born after twelve days, twelve rich land lords are asked to greet the child. In marriage bridegroom's twelve relatives go to receive the bride. Men can marry twice, if children were not born. Nowadays love marriages are also done. But there are no changes in the rituals.

On the eve of death, the patient is given milk, when he is dead, they apply turmeric, sandal powder and sheekakai and bath the body and tie the body with millets, veil the face completely with a cloth and it to the graveyard using bamboo and bury the body. When wife is dead after her husbands death, her body will be buried in the same place, where her husbands body was buried, when husband is dead or wife is dead, wife and husband respectively. Should not go to the graveyard. After bathing in the river, people use to go to their respective houses.

They eat rice, ragi, samai, and all the wild animals except pig, cow buffalo. They collect white ants for fry and eat it. They go for hunting during the months of April, May and June.

They worship Ram, Aranganadhar, Nanjundeshwaran, Mari, Katteri Panimakkam, Bathirakali and also give offerings to God. They celebrate Pongal festival. They have belief in ghosts.

Irulas speak Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Badga, Telugu and Urdu. Irula children nowadays practice to speak and write in Tamil and Kannada. They have separate days in their languages.
Keeping in mind about their hunting practices, Panchayat and their art of dance, they might have served as member in Kings' courtyard.

Nowadays, Irula tribals leave the hills in quest of education. As there are no proper schools in the hills, they shift their places from the hills to other areas. They want their children to study in the school for better livelihood opinions.

**Panchayat**

There is a head for every 'Padi'. They call the head as 'Moopan' and 'Maniakarar'. They used to guide the society. Irulas work in coffee plantations, collect junglewood, others use bamboo to make Muram and Kudaai. Others sell the forest products in the Sandhai.

**Physical characteristics of the Irulas**

The Irulas are the darkest - skinned among the Nilgiri tribals. Though the Irulas are dark-skinned and plautyhrine, some as a result of contact metamorposis, possess skins of markedly paler hue and leptorhine nose (Thurston, 1909). They are having a marked Mongolian type of feature with prominent cheek-bones and short and flat nose.

**Occupation pattern**

The Irulas have permanent hamlets. The village consists of rows of jungle storied huts, with verandah in forest, made of slit bamboo and hatched. Their houses are built on comparative flat terrain, or on level fashioned by digging into slopes and pilling up earth on the outward sides.
The huts are very small and constructed of bamboos interwoven like basketwork, and plastered on the inside with clay. Houses on flatter ground often surround courtyards on two or three sides. They have various store rooms, sheds, huts, platforms used to store firewood, grain and household objects.

Outside their hamlets, house gardens are conspicuous features within this community. In their gardens, they grow fruit crops like banana (*Musa paradisiaca*), citrus (*Citrus medica* L.), guava (*Psidium guajava*) and passion fruit (*Passiflora edulis* Sims); vegetables like bitter guard (*Momordica charantia* L.). Brinjal (*Solanum melongena* L.), cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* L.), tomato (*Lycopersicum esculentum* Miller) and lablab bean (*Dolichus lablab* L.); spices like mustard (*Brassica juncea*); and flowers like *Canna indica* L.

Due to acculturation the Irulas now-a-days live increasingly in non-traditional structures. The Tamilnadu State Government and plantation managements have started furnishing them with substantial row dwellings. Irula children are now receiving free boarding, lodging, and education while residing in boarding schools.

**Religion and ceremonies**

Irula are Hindus, worshipping 'Vishnu' in the name of 'Rangasamy' in Rangasamy peak to whom they do 'Pooja' (worship) (or) at the Karamadai Temple which is located near Coimbatore city. Rangasamy peak is the most sacred hill of the Nilgiri plateau. On the top of Rangaswamy's
peak they have two temples, consisting of circles of rough stones, each enclosing an upright stone, the larger called Dodda (great) and the smaller called Chikka (little) Rangaswamy. The hereditary Poojari (Priest) is an Irula. He is remunerated by offerings of fruit and milk from Irula worshipers. Every year at about sowing time there is a festival at the temples which is attended by the Badagas of the district. They also worship Lord 'Siva' and Mariamma', a form of Durga. They do not know the difference between Vishnu and Siva. They worship Bira Kallu (or) Herostones (Dolmens). These stones are believed to have been built by race of Pandavas.

Main aspects of the economy

The Irulars depend more upon the wages earned by working in estates (plantations). They are more industrious and reliable than the Tamilian plantation workers (Thurston, 1909). Nevertheless, they possess a small plot of ground where they grow tea (Camelia sinensis), Coffea arabica and other crops. Livestock keeping, especially cattle and sheep are also their main economic base. They earn money by selling homemade baskets, brooms, clarinets and honey. An employment in nearby plantations increased, local trade with neighbours play a lesser role in the Irula economy.