

**LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMS FOR THE IRULARTRIBE:  
AN INITIATIVE LED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL  
WORK, MADRAS CHRISTIAN COLLEGE**

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**Abstract**

Located in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Irular was once a self-sufficient agricultural tribe. Natural disasters and becoming involved in bonded labour changed all that, and for generations they were mired in this lifestyle. Eventually, the local Indian government and the International Justice Mission (IJM) rescued them from bonded labour and they were relocated on plots of land safe from such dangers. Since then, Madras Christian College and its Social Work students have got involved with a range of intervention programs and lifestyle training to help re-establish the Irular to someday becoming self-sufficient once again. This has been done through livelihood training and the provision of clean water, building homes, and training to reignite interest in their own culture and discovering new ways to bring in an income. These interventions have improved the capacity of the Irular people in several ways including in the agricultural, educational, and economic spheres.

*Keywords: Irular, Intervention, Madras Christian College, Social Work, Livelihood, Bonded Labour*

**INTRODUCTION**

In Tamil, Irula means “people of darkness”. The Irulas are also called by various ethnonyms such as Erilagaru, Iruligar, Irulam, Kasaba, Kasava, Ten Vaniya, VanaPalli and Villaya. Their name can either refer to their dark-colored skin or how, traditionally, important events would be held at night. The Irula tribe has been classified under the Negrito ethnic group. More recent research has indicated that the Irulas are Austric in origin. Their native language, Irular, is related to the southern Dravidian languages, Tamil and Kannada.

Most Irulas live in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, with the

majority residing in Chengalpattu, North Arcot and South Arcot. They originally lived in the Nilgiri district in the north-western region of Tamil Nadu, adjacent to Coimbatore district and in parts of Karnataka and Kerala. The Irulas in the Nilgiri district were found living adjacent to megalithic sites. Traditionally, Irulas followed farming practices and were greatly impacted by the spread of plantation agriculture, chiefly tea and coffee, by the British. The Irulas, famous for their snake- and rat-catching skills. Are also known for being lowlanders. Lowlanders use the plow and cultivate wet rice, and have ties to other lowlanders and uplanders. Irulas considered to be lowlanders lived with members of other castes, pursuing similar agricultural pursuits. The Irulas originally lived in forests, which their livelihood revolved around. However, with the destruction of forests and the creation of forest reserves, their livelihood was lost. Given the lack of livelihood options, the Irulas were put into a social displacement programme and resettled in the communities nearby, working as daily wage laborers to bring home an income.

The Irulas are considered to be freed bonded laborers. In the past, Irula families were employed by rich farmers to work as plantation workers. Many were given loans ranging from Rs.1, 000/- to Rs.1, 500/-, but were unable to repay the debt and consequently forced into bonded labour. After working to repay their debts, the International Justice Mission (IJM), with support from the government, rescued Irula bonded laborers. The government has given the Irula tribe land on which they currently reside.

Traditionally, the Irular were hunters and trappers of porcupines, rats, and snakes. Now they are settled cultivators, agricultural labourers, and plantation labourers. Basketry and food-gathering are still secondary occupations. According to the 1981 Census, 48.79% of them are identified as workers (62.37% males and 34.51% families). Of these, 60.53% described themselves as agricultural labourers, followed by 10.87% as cultivators, and 12.96% engaged in orchards, plantations, and forestry. Around 7.25 percent of them are engaged in manufacturing, processing, and servicing. The remaining 8.66 percent are engaged in other services. The Irular have a community council of

their own resolve intra-community disputes. The office of the head council, who serves as the manager, is hereditary.

### **Methodology**

To analyze livelihood programs for the Irular tribe, an initiative led by the Department of Social Work, Madras Christian College.

### **Objectives:**

1. To trace the origin and growth of the Irular tribe in the present context.
2. To analyze the factors responsible for their vulnerability.
3. To examine the influence of livelihood programs on their economy.
4. To understand the challenges faced by the community in terms of improving their livelihood status.
5. To offer suggestions for improving the livelihood strategies of the tribe.

The study is exploratory, and is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected through the qualitative research method.

***Qualitative method:*** The purpose of this method is to explore, understand, investigate, identify, evaluate, describe and interrogate. Qualitative techniques are extremely useful when a subject is too complex to be answered by a simple yes/no hypothesis. This method is not as dependent upon sample sizes as upon quantitative methods; a focus group discussion, for example, can generate meaningful results with a small sample group. It is open to personal opinion and judgment. Whilst not as time- or resource-consuming as quantitative experiments, qualitative methods require careful thought and planning to ensure that the results obtained are as accurate as possible.

***Sampling technique:*** A purposive sampling technique was adopted by the investigator for the qualitative study sampling.

***Sample size:*** For the qualitative study, the sample size included men (11), women (15) and youth (10) from the Irular community, and comprised 3 focus group discussions.

## MAIN FINDINGS

A slew of developmental programmes, introduced by tribal welfare agencies, have contributed to the development of the Irular. They have been provided houses, free land for cultivation, subsidies and loans for purchasing milch animals, goats, and agricultural implements. Facilities provided under child welfare schemes have reached them and they are covered by the PDS. However, they are still dependent on shopkeepers and moneylenders.

Traditionally, Irular men found odd jobs each day for daily wages while the women stayed back to either tend to the fields or care for the children. The single-largest occupation is that of a daily wage worker and the second largest that of an agricultural labourer. Monthly income levels are typically Rs. 3000 or higher.

When natives made inroads into their settlements, the Irular shifted their bases from one forest base to another, and in this process, cultivation too underwent transition. Ragi, mustard, grains and pulses are the chief crops cultivated. There are Irular landlords who own as much as 5 to 10 acres of land. Given the inadequacy of the monsoon, however, the cultivation of food grains has taken a beating. Earlier, they would shift to a different piece of land for cultivation though they would not move home. That practice is being revised now.

Cattle production is another source of income. Wild resources like honey, frankincense, firewood and the like are also collected. Earlier, rice was eaten only during festivals but has since become their staple food, owing to a lack of cultivation. The Irular do not eat beef, though chicken, lamb, pork and fish are favourites that they cook once a day for dinner.

Traditionally, the Irulas built their houses together in hamlets or villages known as *mottas*. A single hamlet consists of less than fifty people, and there are separate houses arranged in rows or a combination of two patterns. House plans or home designs follow a traditional pattern. The more traditional hamlets often have separate “special rooms” for Irula women to deliver children or stay in during menstruation. Traditionally, Irula women were responsible for all

household-related tasks while the men worked on farms or as *coolies*. However, the division of labor has since shifted, with Irula women also bringing in an income. The Irula tribe enjoys an open and free society. Each hamlet or village has a headman whose role is to help mediate in issues that may arise between households, as also between government officials and non-Irula neighbors. The Irular are only partly in favour of education for boys and girls. Socio-economic reasons often cause school-going children to drop out of school altogether. Their attitude towards indigenous and modern medicine, as well as family planning programmes, is positive.

Literacy and the level of education are two basic indicators of the development achieved by a group/society, as literacy results in a greater general awareness, besides contributing to the overall improvement in regard to health, hygiene, and social circumstances. According to the 2001 Census, the percentage of literate persons aged 7 years and above is 41.5% in the state of Tamil Nadu, which is lower than the 73.5% reported for the state as a whole. The literacy rate has, however, increased from 27.9% recorded in the 1991 Census, and will likely continue to improve proportionally.

The female literacy rate of 32.8% is lower than the 64.4% registered among the total female population of the state. The lowest literacy rate among women in individual Irular communities is 27.1%. Nearly one-third of the literate women have attained literacy levels not exceeding that of primary school. The percentage of graduates is 1.8%. The dropout rate typically starts after primary school and rises with each subsequent level of education.

The **Field Action Project (FAP)** was started in 2015 when the floods devastated Chennai, displaced families and ravaged property. MSW students from the Madras Christian College Social Work Department were sent to Thirukalukundram taluk in Kancheepuram district to assess the condition of the Irular tribal community. The first set of students worked to bring resources to families with no access to them. As the years progressed, students have carried on doing similar work. Some groups have conducted programs specifically tailored to meet

the needs of these families, while others have assumed the role of advocates to ensure that families receive legal provisions.

The 2017-'18 batch of II MSW students had a new task at hand: mapping the Irular population in Thirukalukundram taluk. In the process, the students officially identified 52 hamlets of Irular tribals within the taluk. Supervised by the Social Work field coordinator at MCC, the students conducted a survey of the 52 hamlets. The survey measured the size of each family, educational qualification, occupation and income, disabilities, legal provisions, classification of the house, and access to resources. Recent teams of Social Work students from MCC have been involved with the Irular tribe for a while now. So far, the following interventions have taken place.

A skill-based program for livelihood support was initiated by MCC's students. The goal was to teach willing women to weave bags that could be sold to bring in an income. To date, MCC has successfully organized two livelihood programs for Irula women one in May and the second in July 2018. Sixty women have been trained in bag-making. Anupriya Murugesan, a graduate of the Social Work department at MCC, led both training sessions. In both programs, women learnt basic weaving techniques. It was expected that on the second and final day of training, the women would have a finished bag, ready to be sold in the market or kept for their own use. The more skilled women moved on to make more complicated designs to be featured in stores and online websites. MCC is currently in the process of developing a business plan to create more sustainable programming for this specific livelihood program.

In July 2018, a large group of men and women from the Irular tribe were transported to the MCC campus to be trained in the folk arts and traditions of their own people. These practices have slowly been lost over time and the goal of the training was to reignite the passion of the Irular people for their own history and traditions. Events included traditional songs and dances, as well as stories once told among the Irular people.

## **CHALLENGES**

The greatest challenge of working with the Irular tribe is their semi-

nomadic nature, which isolates the community and is a major source of their vulnerability. The loss of social capital, in terms of trust, warmth and genuineness among their own people, is another challenge. Monotony and unpredictable livelihood patterns make the men leave home very early in the mornings in search of odd jobs, and they return home very late. The mental makeup of the tribe is to live for the day, which has greatly affected their savings pattern through SHGs. The RBLA is scattered, and so is the Irular community, which lives far away from the challenge of working with the Irular tribe is their semi-nomadic nature, which isolates the community and is a major source of their vulnerability.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

Interventions planned for the future include a day of sports for Irular children, the formation of additional self-help groups within Irular communities, the development of housing structures for those who might still be in need, and diverse advocacy campaigns. For some of those involved in these events, the travel involved is likely their first encounter with the “outside world.” In fact, once rescued from bonded labor, survivors face an entirely new challenge of seeing the real world for the first time in potential generations. They are overwhelmed by simple responsibilities and decisions and find themselves in dire need of guidance. To get from their Irular community to the MCC campus, for example, it is necessary to take a bus and a train. Some of the Irular people had never boarded a train for travel and so were, understandably, very nervous the first few times. Upon their arrival at the MCC campus, the somewhat urban landscape so interested the Irular guests that they tended to wander around the campus, trying to explore it fully. Having a source of light at night is rather uncommon for the Irulas, so they typically retire at around 6 or 7pm. The fact that MCC's streets are well lit prompted an exploration of their temporary homes.

This demonstrates the importance of bringing electricity to Irular communities that still lack it. The lack of light prevents them from continuing with their daily chores. For Team TK and MCC Social Work

students, other future projects will include drafting proposals highlighting the reasons why support is needed to bring amenities like electricity to the Irular people. In addition to electricity, clean water, transportation and medical support/supplies are the need of the hour. The drafted proposals would thereafter be presented to the consulates of various countries located in Tamil Nadu, in the hope that they would be willing to provide the financial support needed. Funding organizations and international outreach programs would also be contacted, should the efforts with the consulates not yield positive results. In the meantime, MCC has been involved in building houses for one particular Irular community, as well as regular visits and support in the form of supplying their basic needs.

In the meantime, self-help groups have been established in many Irular communities. Each member of the community that is able to earn daily wages pools their money together in one place. When a member of the community is in need of money for reasons such as equipment repair, medical emergency, or travel needs, the money is taken from the pool and a payment plan set up for the lendee to eventually pay it back. Typically, the payment plan is kind and involves repaying the full amount over the course of many months. Because of this timeline, putting the money back into the SHG pool is never too difficult. Having SHGs encourages healthy spending and saving habits among the Irular people.

## **CONCLUSION**

MCC's livelihood programs in Irular communities have greatly benefitted the Irulas.

They have developed new skills, such as bag-weaving and traditional songs and dances that are marketable and can build a sustainable income for families. Irular women, who have gained confidence in bag-weaving, appear excited to continue building this skill and eventually selling their bags on a consistent basis. The folklore program has provided the Irular with an opportunity to find ways of making money and also learning about their traditions and customs through art. This skill, combined with bag-weaving, can easily be taught to children and



generations to come. Without the assistance of Madras Christian College, the Irular would still be self-sufficient. However, with given their susceptibility to natural disasters and proclivity for getting involved in bonded labour, the college's interventions provide hope for this tribe to re-establish their self-sustainability and enhance the quality of their lives.

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