

# An Ethnographic Study of Kattunayakar and Irular Tribes: Cultural Practices and Traditions

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## Abstract

*A tribe is a group of people or community that shares common ancestry, culture, language, and often territory. There are more than 476 million indigenous tribes people living in about 90 countries across the world, with more than 5000 distinct groups and speaking 7000 languages. They form 6.2 percent of the global population. India has about 700 tribes and over 1500 tribal languages. The second-highest number of tribal populations are found in India. India has numerous tribes spread across different regions of the country. The indigenous sects in India are naturally isolated from the main stream. Lack of education and communication barriers made it difficult for tribes to compete with the outside world. This limits many opportunities for tribal people. According to the 2011 census, 40.06% of tribals live below the poverty line. Education, one of the fundamental rights of human beings, has the power to change the course of one's life. Education can uplift tribal society, and knowledge of the world paves the way for them to have strong self-esteem and self-employment.*

**Keywords:** Tribal, Kattunayakar, Irular, Education, Society, Schools

## Introduction

The word tribe stemmed from the Latin term ‘Tribus’. Tribe is a group of people or community who shares common ancestry, culture, language, and often territory. W.H.R. Rivers (1914:50) described a tribe as “a group of a simple kind, always in Melanesia settled in a definite locality which speaks a common language and is capable of uniting for common action as in warfare.” There are more than 476 million indigenous people living in about 90 countries across the world with more than 5000 distinct groups and speak 7000 languages. They form 6.2 percent of the global population.

The Khoikhoi and San termed the “Khoi-San” are the oldest tribe found in Africa, the original natives of Southern Africa. They have distinct culture, tradition and continued to live liked the first humans in the world. There are still about 100 uncontacted tribes that never evolved across the world. Most of them live in Guinea, Amazon,

Congo, off the Island of India and Bangladesh. They are voluntarily living in isolation and have avoided contact with the outside world for years. Many tribal groups believe that if they have contact with the Western world, they will be prone to many uncured diseases. Each group has their own language for communication, follows many traditions and have prominent muscles. Songs and music are an integral part of their culture. Their main occupation is farming. Tribal people live closely to nature, mainly known for their agricultural practices. Tribes have their own system of governance, culture, and traditions that they practice till date. vanavasi (forest dwellers), adivasis (first settlers), anusuchit janjati (scheduled tribes)

In Tamil Nadu, there are 36 scheduled tribal groups and six particularly vulnerable tribal groups. The six particularly vulnerable tribal groups in Tamil Nadu are Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, and Kattunayakas. Under Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs had set up 197 Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRs) to provide free quality education to tribal communities. In Tamil Nadu there are total of 8 EMRs schools to empower the tribal community. This paper gives a descriptive study of the Kattunayakas and Irulas societal and educational status.

### **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups**

In India, particularly vulnerable tribal groups make up 8.6% of the total population. In 1975, the Government of India identified the less developed tribal groups and categorized them as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). In 2006, the Government of India renamed Primitive Tribal Groups as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). In total, there are 75 particular tribal groups spread across India. In Tamil Nadu, there are 36 scheduled tribal groups and six particularly vulnerable tribal groups. The six particularly vulnerable tribal groups in Tamil Nadu are Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, and Kattunayakas.

### **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups:**

1. Isolated themselves from the main stream
2. Small population
3. Slower rate of Change
4. No written language
5. Simple technology

### **Kattunayakar**

The word Kattunayakar means ‘King of the Jungle’ They are hunter-gatherers and expertise in honey collection. Kattunayakan, one of the 75 “Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups” is a designated scheduled tribe inhabit the Indian States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka.

### **Kattunayakan’s in Tamil Nadu**

In Tamil Nadu, they live in Gudalur and Padalur taluk in Nilgiris. Their language is an amalgamation of Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada languages. According to the latest India Census date there are around 79,000 kattunayakan population in India and 55,000 in kattunayakas in Tamil Nadu.

### **Occupation**

They grow coffee, Green, Pepper, and banana. Their chief occupation is hunting and collecting honey. They stay in forest for 4-5 days to collect money. Some kattunayakas act as mahouts.

### **Deity**

99.14% kattunayakar follow Hinduism and 0.49% follow Christianity. They worship Lord Shiva and Nayakkar and other natural creations like animals, birds, trees, rocks, and snakes.

### **Culture**

Kattunayakar performs the ‘koonatta’ dance at marriage and during narmamodey ceremony. The dance crew consists of 10 members and is performed by men. They dance in a bent position, making moves to the instrumental beats of ‘Kolalu’, ‘dumbetta’, and ‘chilanka’.

### **Irular Community**

Irular refers to the ‘darkness of their skins or night’ Irulas are one among the six primitive tribes in South India who have been categorized as Scheduled Tribes by the Indian Constitution. They are also known as Kavalkaran, kattukaran, and Pambukaran.

### **Irulas in Tamil Nadu**

Irulas inhabit the northern part of Tamil Nadu. They live across Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts in the west to Ariyalur and Cuddalore districts in the South and Tiruvallur district in the north.

### **Occupation**

The main occupation is catching snakes and rats and collecting honey. They work as laborers during the harvesting season.

### **Language**

Irulas communicate in Irula language a mix of Tamil and Malayalam which can only be spoken. The language is also called by Eravallam, Eruka, Irava, Irulikka, and Korava. UNESCO has declared this language as endangered.

### **Deity**

Most of the Irulas practice Hinduism. While some Irulas worship Vishnu, others still follow animistic practices and consider the tiger as their god and worship its footprints.

### **Culture**

Masi Magam, the greatest festival of Irulas celebrated on the tamil month of masi, where irulas from all parts of Tamil Nadu get together and worship the seven sisters or the seven virgins. They follow many rituals during that period. Cleansing is the significant part of the ritual.

### **Challenges faced by the Tribal People**

1. Illiteracy among the tribal youths
2. Lack of basic facilities
3. Financial instability
4. Communication barrier
5. Identity crisis

### **Importance of Education**

Education is one of the fundamental rights of human beings and has the power to change the course of one’s life. Tribal people are well known for their herbal medicinal and cultural practices. Language being a fence makes it unattainable to the world. Education can uplift social and economic

status of the tribal society, and knowledge of the world paves the way for them to have strong self-esteem and self-employment. It also helps them to distinguish between the right and the wrong, create opportunities and overcome constraints. Education can brighten up the lives of tribal people in so many ways. It breaks the communication barriers and lifts up their trading process. It helps some disadvantaged tribes secure an identification certificate to get access to their basic needs and fight for their rights.

Droupadi Murmu, the 15th President of India, is the second woman president and the first president from a tribal community. She is from a Santhal tribal family. Shes wore in various positions and fought for the rights of tribal people. Golmei Gaiphulshillu Kabui, a Naga woman, becomes the first tribal woman appointed as a judge of the Manipur High Court. Sreedhanya Suresha Kurichiya, a tribal woman from Wayanad district, is the first tribal woman from Kerala to clear the Civil Services examination and is currently serving as a sub-collector and sub-divisional magistrate of Perinthalmanna.

### **Eklavya Model Residential School**

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRs) were implemented in the year 1997-98 by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in the States/UTs under Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India to enhance the quality of education of the Scheduled Tribes. There are about 401 functional EMRs in India and 8 EMRs schools in Tamil Nadu. The objective of the Eklavya Model Residential Schools is to bridge the educational gap and provide free quality education to tribal communities. They provide customised and holistic education to children. In some Eklavya Model Residential school students are admitted through entrance examination.

#### **List of Tribal Schools in Tamil Nadu**

<b>S. No</b>	<b>Name of the School</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Status</b>
1	EMRS Vellimalai	Kallakurichi	Working
2	EMRS Abinavam	Salem	Working
3	EMRS Kodapmundu	The Nilgiris	Working
4	EMRS Athipattu	Thiruvanna Malai	Working
5	EMRS Vishamangalam	Thiruppathur	Working
6	EMRS Sengarai	Namakkal	Working

### **Conclusion**

Tribal people are unique for their special connection with nature and animals. They are well known for their indigenous practices, including apiculture, pisciculture, weaving, pottery, and jewelry making, using things they get from the flora and fauna. They prepare traditional medicines directly from the medicinal plants, roots, and seeds that they have followed forages to cure diseases. Mostly, there are no written documents for all the art skills and traditional medicines they produce, they are passed down orally from generation to generation. Tribal people have unique traits like common religion, culture, language, unity, equality, self-sufficiency, strong relationship with nature and protecting it. Tribal people's shyness to communicate with a wide group of people, geographical isolation, and communication barriers are identified as indications that they are not able to come out of their shell. The main stream of people collapses and invades the tribal world, making them homeless and forcing them to move to the city. Main stream people not only make their lives difficult but are also notable to accept them as part of their society.

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