



Irulars - இரீளா

The Irulars are a tribal community in southern India, mainly in the Kanchipuram, Nilgiris and Villupuram districts of Tamil Nadu.

In 2018, their population in India was estimated at 237,000 – 100,000 in Tamil Nadu and 36,000 in the districts where we work.

They are geographically, linguistically and culturally isolated from the dominant Indian society. They face violent discrimination as they are "casteless".

They are therefore subjected to all types of rejections that amount to violations of fundamental human rights laws linked to minority issues (modern slavery), including that of the right to citizenship and its derivatives.

Traditionally hunter-gatherers, they lived in the forests from which they were hunted by decree. They are considered the ancestors of the gypsies. Deported from traditional hunting grounds due to deforestation and urban encroachment, the Irulars are struggling to meet their daily needs. Their main occupation was the capture of snakes and rats.

Generally, they are unemployed or work in low-paying jobs. Unskilled and with an illiteracy rate of 34% in the 2013 census, they face high levels of poverty with little chance of breaking this cycle. A 2008 report indicates that 73% of Irular tribes live below the global poverty line. Economic necessity has led 46% of Irular children to drop out of school early for work.

Irular Pantheon

The Irulars worship their mother goddess, gods and spirits. The mother goddess is the personalization of nature itself and her soul exists in every blade of grass.

Irular means "those in the shadows". Men and women are equal. The Irulars ignore social organization in the form of castes.

Special characteristics of Irulars and Traditional Medicine.

The Irulars derive a significant part of their livelihood from forest products. They have orally-transmitted medicinal knowledge in the field of plants. While the gathering of plants is an integral part of their daily lives, it is not conceived as a separate occupation but rather as an activity that accompanies others.

As herders, the elderly take advantage of this opportunity to collect specific plants. Similarly, children and teenagers bring back berries when they return from the neighbouring village.

The search for traditional medicinal products constitutes another activity no less prestigious, but the Irulars' awareness of the demand of local Ayurvedic doctors and individuals. International institutes as well as local and international companies are beginning to push this community to grow local medicinal plants based on their empirical medicinal know-how and specific products for therapeutic use. They strive to plant and conserve unusual species.

Indirectly, the Irulars are participating in the growing development of the global market and the development of Ayurvedic medicine in India.