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## **AN ASSESSMENT OF POVERTY AND LIVING STANDARDS OF IRULAS (A PRIMITIVE TRIBAL GROUP IN TAMIL NADU)**

*P. Ambiga Devi\* and  
Hemasrikumar\*\**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The tribal population identified as the aboriginal inhabitants of India are seen in almost every state of India. There are some distinct backward groups among the tribal communities, who live more or less in isolation, inaccessible terrain and maintain a lifestyle that remains static through centuries. The population of these socially isolated tribal communities small in size and referred to as the primitive tribal groups (PTG) are in the lowest strata of the general tribes.*

*In Tamil Nadu, Irulas are one of the primitive tribal groups and a major scheduled tribe. Since the Irulas are forest dwellers, they are quite familiar with the jungle produce, which they barter with the other tribal communities. The present study is an attempt to study the prevalence of poverty among the Irulas in the Nilgiris district. A detailed interview schedule was prepared containing questions on the socio-economic and demographic features of the tribals; their health details, political and general awareness. The data were collected from the selected households in the month of October of 2008. The study brings out the widespread poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, amongst the primitive tribal communities in the Nilgiris district.*

The tribal population identified as the aboriginal inhabitants of India are seen in almost every state of India. For centuries, they have been living a simple life based on the natural environment and have developed cultural patterns congenial to their physical and social environment. India occupies second position in the world in tribal population next to Africa. According to 2001 Census, there are about 573 tribes with 84.3 million population constituting 8.2 per cent of the country's population. The socio-economic problems of the tribes had first attracted the attention of the government after obtaining freedom in

1947. The Founders of the Indian Constitution considered the miserable condition of the tribals who were segregated from the national mainstream and provided special measures for ameliorating their living conditions. Sixty years of concerted efforts and constitutional provisions for uplifting scheduled tribe population notwithstanding, more than half of the scheduled tribe population in India are still unable to meet the basic requirement of food and continue to live in abject poverty. Poverty is deepest among the scheduled tribes in the country. India's poorest people include 50 per cent of the members of the scheduled tribes

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(Kachhap, Suvashi Kaccpap, 2008). The percentage of the scheduled tribe population living below the poverty line has come down from 52.17 in 1993-1994 to 45.83 in 1999-2000. But still one could see a large difference in the poverty gap among the tribal and general population. In fact the gap has widened from 14.08 in 1993-1994 to 18.74 in 1999-2000.

There are some distinct backward groups among the tribal communities, who live more or less in isolation, inaccessible terrain and maintain a life-style that remains static through centuries. The population of these socially isolated tribal communities, small in size and referred to as the primitive tribal groups (PTG), are in the lowest strata of the general tribes. At present, there are 75 PTGs having a population of about 16 lakh people spread over 17 states and union territories (Sharma, 2001), who are characterised by (i) pre-agriculture level of technology (ii) a stagnant or declining population (iii) extremely low literacy and (iv) a subsistence level of economy. Most of these PTGs are small communities and in the past and at present their growth rate has been abnormally low in relation to the rest of the population (TRC, 2007). The PTGs in India are beset by yet another problem: indebtedness and poverty. Poverty is the sum total of a multiplicity of factors that include not just income and calorie intake but also access to land and credit, nutrition, health and longevity, literacy and education and safe drinking water, sanitation and other infrastructural facilities.

In Tamil Nadu, among the 36 scheduled tribes, the Government of India has identified six communities as primitive tribal groups. They are (i) Todas (ii) Kotas (iii) Kurumbas (iv) Irulas (v) Paniyans and (vi) Kattunayakas. All these six PTGs live in the Nilgiris district. Among them four PTGs Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Paniyans live exclusively only in the Nilgiris district. The other two PTGs, Irulas and Kattunayakas, live in the Nilgiris district as well

as other districts of Tamil Nadu. Hence the Nilgiris district was chosen for the current study to analyse the prevalence of poverty among the PTGs. The present study is an attempt to study the prevalence of poverty among the Irulas in the Nilgiris district.

The name Irula is supposed to be derived from Tamil meaning 'irul' darkness, which may refer either to the gloomy jungles in which they live or to their very swarthy complexions. The Irular or Irulas are found in the southern part of India in the States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, Irulas are one of the primitive tribal groups and a major scheduled tribe. In the Nilgiri's district, the total population of the Irulas, according to the Census taken by the Tribal Research Centre (TRC) for HADP project during June-July 2003 is 8714 persons living in 67 Irula settlements with 1913 households. Since the Irulas are forest dwellers, they are quite familiar with the jungle produce, which they barter with the other tribal communities. The main forest produce they depend on are: timber, bamboo, honey and wax from the honeycomb. These they barter with the Badagas. They also started off with cultivation, which they carried down to the sandy held at Mettupalayam, a nearby city every week. They exchange their forest produce and grains for tobacco and salt, which they call 'pogank' and 'oppoo' and even bought clothes.

Though a few NGOs, like the Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) help the Irula children to get formal education through balwadis and crèches, the credit for Irula educational advancement goes to the Government Tribal Residential Schools with hostel facility. The Irula parents took extraordinary care in sending their children particularly their boys to school but restricted the education of the girl child only up to puberty stage. Irula children are experts in mathematics, because of their traditional games and indoor plays (Jakka Parthasarathy,

1986). The educated children often accompany their parents along with riped fruits to sell in the Mettupalayam market where the parents took the help of their educated school children in calculating the expenditure and income and also while giving the change of coins after selling the fruits or forest produce items.

Out of the total Irula population in the Nilgiris district, 65.63 per cent are non-literates and 34.37 per cent are literate. The data reveal that among the Irula population, there are six girl and nine boy graduates and 140 girls and 125 boys have already passed 10<sup>th</sup> standard through the Government Tribal Residential Schools.

### Methodology

As per the census carried out by the Tribal Research Centre in 2003-04 there were 1913 Irular households in the Nilgiris district. Out of this 146 households were selected. The required data for the study are mainly of primary in nature. A detailed interview schedule was prepared containing questions on the socio-economic and demographic features of the tribals; their health details, political and general awareness. The data were collected from the selected households in the month of October of 2008. To draw meaningful inference, a scientific methodology, accompanied by appropriate statistical and

**Table 1 : Selected Statistics of the Sample Households**

Parameters	No.	%	Parameters	No.	%
Age(years)			Education		
<5	56	10.1	Illiterate	126	22.74
<5-14	103	18.6	Dropouts	52	9.39
<15-59	391	70.6	Literates	320	57.76
60+	4	0.7			
Total	554	100			
Sex ratio	972		Marital status		
Size of the family			Single	21	6.77
≤4	112	76.7	Married	273	88.06
>4	34	23.3	Divorced	16	5.16
Type of owned house			Number of rooms		
Pucca	9137	6.2	1	137	93.8
Mud	137	93.8	2	9	6.2
Occupation					
Coolies	296	99	Average annual income (Rs)	8,130	
State Govt. service	3	1			

Source : Field survey, 2008.

quantitative tools is necessary. The statistical tools and quantitative techniques used in the current study are: Head Count Index of Poverty (HCIP), Poverty Gap Index (PGI), Quality of Life Index (QLI) and Human Development Index (HDI).

### Major Findings of the Study

*Socio-economic and Demographic Profile of the Sample Households* : Among the selected households 98.6 per cent are Hindus and 1.4 per cent are Christians. All the selected sample households are staying in their hamlets for more than 150 years. Family is a complex and dynamic institution in India for many decades. In the sample 99 per cent are in nuclear and one per cent in joint families. On personal interview with the tribal people, they stated that by living in nuclear families, they could have separate ration cards, to buy provisional items at a subsidised rate from the ration shops.

Age has an important bearing on the limit, above and below which a person cannot be expected to work for economic benefits. About 70 per cent are in the active working age group of 15-59 years. Irulas are characterised in following small family norm in a greater percentage. About 77 per cent of the Irulas have less than 5 members in their families. Level of literacy is one of the most important indicators of social, cultural and health improvement among the tribal communities (Madan, 1951). The Indian tribes are exposed to literacy only recently (Raza Moonis, *et al.*, 1990). By and large, their response to programmes of literacy and of formal education varied significantly between tribes and regions. About one-fifth of the Irulas are illiterates. Infant marriage, which is widespread among the Hindus, is a custom unknown to the tribals. In the study group 88 per cent of the Irulas above 21 years of age are married. Though all live in their own houses

**Table 2 : Average Annual Food Expenditure**

(in Rs.)

S.No.	Items	Amount spent (Rs)	S.No.	Items	Amount spent (Rs)	S.No.	Items	Amount spent (Rs)
1	Cereals and pulses	351.00 (13.95)	6	Root vegetables	223.15 (8.87)	11	(1 to 10)	1928.87 (76.65)
2	Milk and its products	52.88 (2.10)	7	Fruits and nuts	140.26 (5.57)	12	Tobacco	191.78 (7.62)
3	Edible oil	231.20 (9.19)	8	Salt and sugar	145.97 (5.80)	13	Intoxicants	395.89 (15.73)
4	Meat, egg and fish	236.24 (9.39)	9	Spices	124.69 (4.95)	14	(12 to 13)	587.67 (23.34)
5	Vegetables	208.38 (8.28)	10	Beverages	215.10 (8.55)	15	(11+14)	2516.54

Source : Field survey, 2008.

only 6 per cent are in pucca houses and have two rooms, the others live in mud houses with single room. Occupation is considered as a major factor which brings about substantial changes in the socio-economic life of the people. On personal interview and observation it was noticed that Irulas are engaged in labour works on the basis of daily or monthly wages on tea and coffee estates owned by the non-tribes.

*Expenditure on Food* : Table 2 gives the amount spent by the tribal households on food.

Nearly one-fourth of their food expenditure is on tobacco and alcohol. Apart

from these, cereals and pulses form the major component of their food items.

*Non-food Expenditure* : Table 3 gives the average annual amount spent on non-food items by the selected sample households.

The amount spent on life cycle rituals of birth, marriage and death form a significant portion of the non-food expenditure of the tribals. Including the pilgrimage to temples along with the life cycle rituals, it is seen that the tribals spend about two-fifths of their non-food expenses towards these. For the Irulas, next to social ceremonies about 20 per cent of their non-food expenditure is on clothing.

**Table 3 : Average Annual Expenditure on Non-food**

(In Rs)

No.	Items	Amount	No.	Items	Amount	No.	Items	Amount
1	Clothing	251.00 (17.47)	5 (6.00)	Footwear	86.30 (15.69)	9	Marriage	225.51
2	Education	44.29 (3.08)	6	Fuel	109.39 (7.61)	10	Funeral	145.55 (10.13)
3	Health expenses	107.04 (7.44)	7	Social ceremonies Temple	120.89	11 (8.41)	(7 to 10)	635.44 (44.22)
4	Transport	86.57 (6.03)	8	Birth	143.49 (9.99)	12	Recreation	116.78 (8.13)
13	Total	1436.81						

Source : Primary data, 2008.

Figures in brackets denote percentage to column total.

*Nutritional Status* : In India, poverty is measured by the yardstick of minimum requirements of calories intake which was propounded by the Planning Commission. The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) draft spelt out the poverty line on the basis of the recommended nutritional requirements of

2400 calories per person per day in the rural areas.

Table 4 gives the data on the per capita calorie intake per day by the tribal households in the study area. As can be seen from the Table, none of the tribal households reached

the desired consumption level of 2400 calories per day per person. Nutritionally all the households are below the poverty line.

They all come under the category of very poor, as their calorie intake per day per person is very low; less than 1000 calories.

**Table 4 : Distribution of The Households Based On Per Capita Calorie Intake Per Day**

Calories	401-799	800-1199	1200-1559	Average calorie intake
No. of families	7(4.79)	131(89.73)	8(5.48)	983

Source : Primary data, 2008; Figures in brackets denote percentage to column total.

*Measurement of Poverty* : The tribal people are more vulnerable to environmental degradation. To design policies that protect the tribals, it is important to understand the nature of poverty of the tribals. An attempt is made to estimate and assess the extent of poverty among the selected sample households. Intensity of poverty is measured in terms of income. Income is a simple way to define poverty. The average annual per capita income of the tribal households is Rs 2616.

The World Bank measures poverty using income as an indicator. It uses a uniform poverty line of \$ 1 per day across all countries. For India in 2005, the World Bank determined that Rs 15 equivalent to \$ 1 based on the purchasing power parity. Based on the classification of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS, 2007), the sample households are grouped under six categories based on their per capita annual income as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 : Classification of Households**

S.No.	Classification	Annual per capita income (Rs)
1	Extremely poor	≤ 4050
2	Poor	4051-5400
3	Marginally poor	5401-6750
4	Vulnerable	6751-10800
5	Middle income	10801-21600
6	High income	> 21600

Source : NCEUI, 2007.

*Classification of Households* : Based on the classification given in Table 5, the tribal households are placed under different income groups. Table 6 gives the classification of the households based on their annual per capita income.

**Table 6 : Classification of the Tribal Households**

Category Tribe	Extremely Poor	Poor	Marginally Poor	Vulnerable	Middle Income	High Income
Number of households	122 (83.56)	13 (8.90)	5 (3.42)	5 (3.42)	1 (0.68)	0 (0)

Source : Estimates based on field survey, 2008.

Figures in brackets denote percentage to row total.

Greater percentages (83.56) of the Irulas are 'extremely poor'. From the above findings one could infer that 6.84 per cent of the non-poor households could be deemed border line households. They could be shifted to below poverty line group at any time. In the following section an attempt has been made to measure the prevalence of poverty on the chosen tribal groups.

*Estimation of Poverty* : The level of poverty is estimated in this section using the following methods :

- i. Head count ratio – Poverty incidence ratio

- ii. Poverty gap ratio – Poverty intensity ratio
- iii. Squared poverty gap ratio – Poverty severity ratio

Derivation and practical application of an unambiguous poverty index is a debatable issue. The most popular and widely used measure is head count measure of poverty. It states the proportion of people whose income is below a designated poverty line. Table 7 gives the estimated income poverty measurements using head count ratio, poverty gap ratio and poverty squared gap ratio.

**Table 7 : Income Poverty Estimates**

Measures	Head Count Ratio	Poverty Gap Ratio	Squared Poverty Gap Ratio
Poverty index	0.9246	0.5831	0.33634

Source: Estimates based on field survey, 2008.

*Head Count Ratio* : The head count ratio which is otherwise known as the poverty - incidence ratio shows that the probability of being poor is high among the Irulas (92.46 per cent). The head count ratio has some demerits. The measure of poverty should increase when income of the poor households decreases (monotonicity axiom) or when income of a poor household is transferred to a less poor household (transfer axiom). But the

requirement is to find out the distribution of income among the poor and not simply to indicate how many people are poor. Besides, the head count ratio does not take account of the depth or the severity of poverty amongst the poor themselves.

*Poverty Gap Ratio* : The poverty gap ratio which is also known as the poverty intensity ratio considers both intensity and incidence.

The aggregate and average gaps have something to do with the measurement of the extent of poverty. The poverty gap ratio measures the proportionate gap between the average income of the poor and the poverty line income. This shows how much income would have to be transferred to the poor to bring their income up to the poverty line.

The poverty gap ratio shows that the intensity of poverty is insignificant among the Irulas with the maximum head count ratio of 0.92. The level of poverty in terms of this measure for the sample households of the Irulas is 0.58. For the Irulas to come above the poverty line their income has to be increased by 58 per cent.

*Squared Poverty Gap Ratio* : The poverty gap ratio is insensitive to the transfer of income between the persons who are poor and continue to be poor, even after the transfer. It is also insensitive to the number of people sharing the gap. It does not take into account the inequality among the poor. The simple poverty gap ratio indicates the mean distance below the poverty line as a proportion

of the poverty line. It measures severity of poverty. The squared poverty gap ratio (SPG ratio) or the weighted poverty gap ratio (WPG ratio) is derived as weighting individual poverty gap by the gaps themselves to reflect the average gap between the income of those below the poverty line and the poverty line itself. This gives the severity of the poor as it is more sensitive to redistribution among the poor. From the squared poverty gap, it is inferred that the Irulas have the high incidence of poverty with the squared poverty gap ratio being 0.336.

*Quality of Life Index* : The Government of India, in collaboration with the UNDP spelt out in the Urban Poverty Removal Strategy that poverty has a social dimension-viz-poor quality of housing and the living environment, lack of access to basic services like clean water, education etc. With all these issues, based on the methodology followed by Dhanasekaran (2001), the quality of life index is constructed with a set of 10 quantitative and qualitative indicators.

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I.	Social status	-	i) Literacy level of the head of the household
II.	Income status	-	ii) Occupation of the head of the household
			iii) Occupation of the female members in the household
		-	iv) Annual per capita income of the household
III.	Nutritional status	-	v) Calorie intake per person per day
			vi) Protein intake per person per day
			vii) The proportion of food expenditure to total expenditure
IV.	Clothing	-	viii) Per capita annual expenditure on clothing
V.	Housing	-	ix) Type of house and
		-	x) Number of rooms per person

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The quantitative and qualitative indicators used in the current study are briefly discussed. In constructing the quality of life index; the parameters which are indicators of the quality of life are to be considered. With these criteria, ten indicators are chosen. They are classified under five categories.

Human poverty relates to deprivation in education. The contribution of education to reduce the absolute poverty was recognised since long (Ribich, 1968). The higher the level of education of the population, the lower would be the proportion of poor people in the total population. This is because education imparts knowledge and skills to the recipients of education which in turn is associated with participation in better employment and higher wages. The provision of good quality education is the most important equaliser for the economy. The Eleventh Plan states, "Education is the most critical input for empowering people with skills and knowledge and for giving them access to productive employment in the future".

Income status, which is determined by the occupational structure, throws light on the poverty status of any area. Per capita income is one of the determining factors of poverty. There is an inverse relationship between per capita income and poverty. There is a relationship between dependency, unemployment and poverty. The higher the dependency ratio, the lower is the collective income per head. Families with a relatively higher proportion of dependents would suffer from low per capita income.

In India, poverty is measured by the yardstick of minimum requirement of calories intake, propounded by the Planning Commission. It has been worked out in the Seventh Five Year Plan Draft that for a person to be above the poverty line there should be a minimum intake of 2400 calories per day per

person in rural areas and 2100 calories per day per person in urban areas. Suhhatme has worked out a minimum nutritional target of 66.6 grams of protein per day per person. In India, income is used as a proxy for minimum nutritional requirements but even in the case of rich classes undernutrition and malnutrition prevail.

The consumption pattern of the households also reveals the economic conditions, as is proportion of their expenditure towards food.

Clothing satisfies the basic need next to food. Clothing requirements of children, men and women necessitate different norms for clothing. In the estimates prepared by Guru Swamy (2006), the clothing requirements have been calculated at Rs 207 per person per annum or Rs 17 per month.

Housing is the third basic requirement of mankind next to food and clothing. Shelter is very much related to improving the quality of life. Non-availability of shelter affects the quality of life.

In the light of the importance of the indicators, the poverty index must acquire in-built flexibility with the development strategies. To make the poverty yardstick 10 indicators are measured in terms of their relative position on the composite index.

To construct the quality of life index table; the actual values of the 10 indicator variables are converted into a seven point scale of 0 to 6. The minimum score that an indicator could get is 'zero', and the maximum is 'six'. Range and points for each sub-division are fixed arbitrarily. The chief criterion is to include the full range of data in the survey. In some cases the points represent the data proportionately. In others the interval between the adjacent two points may not be proportionate to any other two points in that division.

The average quality of life index calculated for the six tribal groups based on the above constructed quality of life index is 0.85. The average quality of life index lies between 0 and 6; if it is closer to 6; it implies higher quality of life and closer to '0' implies poor quality of life. The estimated average quality of life index values reveal that Irulas are the most deprived group.

*Human Development Index* : The human development index is a summary measure of human development. Based on the methodology of the UNDP, Human Development Index

(HDI) is constructed. Human development index shows the overall development. It measures the average achievement of a region in basic human capabilities. The human development index indicates whether people lead a long and healthy life, are educated and knowledgeable and enjoy a decent standard of living. Human development index examines the average condition of all people in a country. According to the UNDP methodology, three indicators are used to construct the human development index. They are health, educational status and standard of living. For health, life expectancy at birth is taken as an

The formula used for the construction of an index is given as

$$\text{Dimension index} = \frac{\text{Actual value} - \text{Minimum value}}{\text{Maximum value} - \text{Minimum value}}$$

Table 8 gives the maximum and minimum values for calculating the human development index.

**Table 8 : Maximum And Minimum Values For Calculating Human Development Index**

Indicator	Maximum value	Minimum value
Life expectancy at birth (years)	85	25
Adult literacy rate (%)	100	0
Gross enrolment ratio (%)	100	0
Per capita income (Rs)	40,000	100

Source : Human Development Report 2007/2008, p 356.

The calculated Human Development Index of the households is given in Table 9.

**Table 9 : Human Development Index of the Irulas**

Average Life expectancy Index	Average education Index	Average income Index	Average HDI
0.218	0.506	0.524	0.416

Source : Estimates based on field survey, 2008.

indicator. For educational status, adult literacy and school enrolment ratio are the proxy variables. For standard of living real per capita income is the indicator.

The Table clearly indicates how the Irulas are deprived of health, education and income. The human development index is much lower.

### Conclusion

The socio-economic conditions of the Irulas are far from satisfactory. Despite the developments that have taken place in the rural areas, the tribals are cut-off from these developments. The income of the tribal population is meagre, not even substantial to meet the basic needs. There are some rigid

social and cultural conventions which compel even the poorest tribe to spend money on marriage, birth and death ceremonies. Per capita expenditure on intoxicants is quite high among the tribals. The tribals suffer from low income and low consumption and, as a result, there is a higher level of poverty. The study further brings out the widespread poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, amongst the primitive tribal communities in the Nilgiris district. Tribal development is a constitutional obligation and therefore, all concerted efforts must be made to ensure that there is no significant gap in the levels of development among the tribals. Therefore, policy intervention should focus on these factors and implementation should be result oriented.

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