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The Irula Language and Literature

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There are no primitive languages. Every language that has developed naturally in human society serves admirably as a means of communication in that particular society. Every language is a trial, an essay. And different linguistic communities literally inhabit and traverse different landscapes of conscious being.

Ethnologue (Languages of the World, 16th edition reports the population of the Irulas as 200,000 (2003). The name Irula is said to have derived from the Tamil word 'Irul' which means darkness. It may refer either to the gloomy jungle in which they live, or to their complexion. The government of India identifies the Irula community as one of the Primitive Tribal Groups of Tamilnadu. The various sub-groups of Irula are: Malanadu Irula, Kasaba, Vettakada Irula, Uralis, Kadupujaris (Iruliga, Velliyans).

The Irula is a South Dravidian primitive aboriginal tribal community spread over 4 southern states of India – Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The population of the Irulas is 200,000. The Irulas tend to switch over to other languages whenever they consider it advantageous. But Irula itself is an elegant language. Hence, it is worth preserving and studying.

Several scholars predict that up to 90% of the world's languages may well be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century, which would reduce the present number of almost 7,000 languages to less than 700. One such language that faces such a threat is the Irula language. This language faces danger because its speakers no longer pass it onto the next generation. Children may no longer acquire their language even when it is still spoken by many thousands of elderly speakers. Today, this tribal language is shrinking and it will ultimately vanish, if proper measures are not taken to reverse.

The Irula is a South Dravidian primitive aboriginal tribal community spread over 4 southern states of India – Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The population of the Irulas is 200,000. The Irulas tend to switch over to other languages whenever they consider it advantageous. But Irula itself is an elegant language. Hence, it is worth preserving and studying. A UNESCO study reveals that the Irula language is at risk of extinction. UNESCO which conducted a worldwide survey on endangered languages, has cautioned that unless the concerned authorities take immediate steps, "these languages (Tulu, Kodava, Koraga, Kurumba and Irula) may vanish by the end of this century". UNESCO also emphasized that efforts should be made by communities, which speak these languages, to preserve them to maintain cultural diversity.

Ancestral languages can only survive in the long run if meaningful roles for them can be established in the lives of the community members. Ultimately, in order to maintain and perpetuate the world's language diversity, these speakers have to find good reasons for keeping their ancestral language alive in natural everyday communication with their offspring.

Language endangerment is caused among the Irula tribe primarily by external forces such as economic, cultural, and educational subjugation. It is also caused by internal forces, such as the community's negative attitude towards its own language or by the general decline of group identity. The Irula tribal communities associate their disadvantaged social and economic position with their ancestral culture and language. They have come to believe that their languages are of no use anymore and not worth retaining. They have abandoned their languages and cultures in the hope of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood and enhance social mobility for themselves and their children. But what they do not understand is that without their language they are likely to lose their identity.

Diffloth (1968) considered the speech of Irulas as the Irula dialect of Tamil, and a Dravidian language of Tamil – Malayalam group. It is Kamil Zvelebil who in 1955, tried to show that the Irula speech is an independent South Dravidian language akin to Tamil, particularly old Tamil, with some Kannada like features. Before that, it was traditionally denied or put to doubt, and Irula even had the sad distinction of being described as a crude or corrupt mixture of Tamil and Kannada. Kamil Zvelebil emphasized its independent stature again in 1968, 1971 and 1973.

Ethnologue (Languages of the World, 16th edition, 2003) reports the population of the Irula as 200,000. The Irula is a South Dravidian primitive aboriginal tribal community spread over 4 south Indian states – Tamilnadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. In Tamil Nadu they live in the Nilgiris, Coimbatore and Periyar districts; In Kerala they live in the Palghat District, Attapady and Walayar panchayats. Several terms like Irula, Irava, Irulan, Irular, Irulavan, Iruligar, Iruliga, Kesaba, Urali, Erukala, Erulavar, Kad Chensu, Korava, Kadupujari and Velliyans are used to designate them in different regions of these four states. They live in 4 taluks, in Coimbatore district, namely, Coimbatore South, Coimbatore North, Avanasi and Mettupalayam. Nearly 100 Vettakada Irula settlements are found in the forest areas or in the deep mountainous jungles. Coimbatore District houses 4254 Irulas in 40 settlements and comprises 139 villages. The Tribal settlements in the Siruvani Hills are 4, comprising 14 villages. They are: Perumalkoilpathy, Nallurpathy, Moongilmadaikuttai, Sadivayal, Seengapathy, Pottapathy, Vellapathy, Borethi, Kalkothi, Muttathuvayal, Mullankadu, Poondi, Dhanikkandi and Pattiyarkoilpathy.

Dr. Perialwar, in the course of his linguistic study was able to identify 8 variants of Vettakada Irula. They are Nallurpathy dialect, Perumal Koilpathy dialect, Palamalai dialect (spoken in 7 hamlets in Periyannayanpalayam), Velliyankadu dialect, Attapadi dialect (spoken in Kerala), Abanoor dialect, Kottathurai dialect and Maruthamalai dialect. Among the Vettakada Irula of Coimbatore District (Perumalkoilpathy dialect, Nallurpadi dialect, Palamalai dialect), Nallurpadi and Palamalai dialect speakers are numerically predominant. The three dialect speakers live in close proximity to each other. Nallurpadi dialect retains more old features.

Irulas of Siruvani Hills are bilinguals and can also speak Tamil. Generally they do not speak Irula in the presence of non-Irulas. Due to their social insecurity and inferiority complex they think that their speech is not a language. They have an apologetic and shy attitude towards their

own language. The pressure and prestige of the larger contact language is so great that Irulas tend to switch over to the prestigious tongue Tamil whenever they consider it necessary, advantageous or elegant.

The Uralis speak two distinct dialects. They are: Asanur dialect and Kalidimba dialect. Zvelebil uses the term Irula-Urali for those who speak the Irula dialect of Dinbhum. (1982:77). The Kaadupuujaaris or Iruliga are the Karnatake Irulas. Their dialect, lexically, phonologically and structurally resembles more with Kannada than with Tamil. (Kempe Gowda, 1974:11). The Velliyan or Villiyans are Tamil speaking Irulas of Tamilnadu. They are linguistically and socio – culturally different from the Irula language speaking Irulas.

According to a tentative hypothesis by Kamil Zvelebil, a pre-Dravidian Melanid population that forms the bulk of the Irulas anthropologically, adopted (or perhaps was forced to adopt) an ancient pre- or proto-Tamil dialect, which was superimposed almost totally on their native (pre-Dravidian) speech. This ‘new’ speech-form then became the basis of the Irula language, which must have subsequently been in close contact with (and hence influenced by) the other tribal languages of the Nilgiri area as well as with the large surrounding languages such as Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam.

Malanadu Irulas speak a dialect which they consider as a superior variety among the dialects of Irula language because it still preserves the important linguistic features of the Irula language. One of the striking linguistic peculiarities of Irula dialects is aphaeresis and sound displacements. Malanadu Irulas are found in about 50 hamlets of Coonoor Taluk. The Kasabas are found in some settlements of Ooty. The Malanadu Irulas consider themselves as socially and linguistically superior to Vettakada Irula because the latter group has the habit of eating rats.

There are songs and folklores and folk tales existing in Irula Language. But all are in oral form only. The Erla Naya is an elegant language that has a wealth of forms. Although it is a primitive language, it has developed naturally in human society, and serves admirably as a means of communication. The language has nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, clauses, all the major components of language that are needed in verbal conversations as well as in literary works.

The Irula ‘tene paatu’ is also called ‘caame okka paatu’. Their cultivation of tene, came, pandi and ragi was a vital aspect of their economy. Now it has only a secondary role. Due to the predominance of ‘tene’ and ‘came’, this song is named as ‘tene paatu’ or ‘came okka paatu’. These millet songs are sung by the Irula men and women while they are sowing, weeding, harvesting and removing millets from harvested fields. These songs are also sometimes sung on a pipe or a flute accompanied by a drum. ‘Okku’ means removing ‘caame’ corn from the harvested ‘caame’ by treading with the legs of men or women.

‘Pee’ means ‘God’ or family deity. ‘Pee paatu’ are songs on family deity. ‘Pee paatu’ songs are classified into two kinds on the basis of their contents. One is about deities, and the other about nature. The same line is repeated after every alternate line for some peepaatu songs. Another characteristic is that the words ‘gunjmaada’, ‘punje’ (worship), ‘mallige’ (jasmine), marulu caami (possessed God), kettiyakkala (younger sister) are found at the end of every line of the song.

‘Peepaatu’ songs of nature are about trees, herbs, shrubs, flowers, and various kinds of flora all around them. Some of these songs are sung as duets and choruses. Some are sung on kvaalu pipe. These peepaatu are set in the form of an address by an elder sister to her young sister.

‘Caavupaatu’ are funeral songs. These songs are unusually lengthy. They are set in the form of an address to the head of the family or to any other member of the family, describing events which took place in the life of the dead person. They describe both good deeds and bad actions. Some songs describe the difficulties which have arisen in the present world. They are songs based on realities.

Most of the popular songs describe the difficulties which have arisen in the present world. They are songs based on reality. There are also quite a number of songs centred on love. Lullabies are also available among Irula songs. Every line in a lullaby ends with the Irula word ‘joo’ or ‘coo’. Irula is almost totally a preliterate society. Hence, the oral art and folklore of the Irulas has a multiple function to fulfill. While amusing and relaxing it is also above all educational: songs, riddles, stories, and myths incorporate traditional wisdom and morals. Also, it validates Irula culture and justifies its rituals and institutions.

Together with dance and music, the narrative art promotes the Irula group feeling of solidarity, maintains conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour, ensures individuals who do not behave, converts work into play, and, of course, offers the most easily accessible and simple form of entertainment.

The fact that Irula creativity is expressed mainly through simple music, dance, song, and story – telling also has underlying economic and social reasons. It goes back not so long ago to the hunting – gathering way of life of their ancestors, when Irulas were moving from place to place in the jungle areas. For these people, mobility was all important. The Irulas do not show any special skill in manufacturing objects, like the other tribal communities. In contrast, story – telling, singing, all forms of verbal art, and music and dance play a very important role in Irula life.

One typical feature of Irula story – telling is the unbridled fantasy, which is responsible for as many individual variations on one topic as there are individual narrators. Stories are usually told with gusto and relish and listened to with great attention and lively participation. The Irulas themselves usually distinguish between two kinds of narratives: ‘palame’ (oldness, antiquity) and ‘parsanga’ (narration). Their riddles are called ‘vedekathe’.

One of the ballads sung by the Irula women folk is ‘Gundu Malligay’. It is the story of betrayal, dying, descent to the underworld, resurrection, fertility, reinstating the loss, reward in heaven and the eternal punishment that sinners are doomed to. Thus the Irula ballad resounds the Christian myth.

Akin to Judas’s betrayal of Jesus, the hero of this ballad is betrayed by his own kith and kin. His brothers-in-law, for no solid reason strip him and set him ablaze. This visualizes again the stripping of Jesus. The hero dies physically and reaches the underworld. He remains there for three days like Christ. Like Jesus who made use of his time in the underworld, the hero

preoccupies himself collecting the seeds of the underworld vegetable plants and resurrects back to life on the third day, dressed in loin clothes. The image of Jesus on the cross come flashing in here.

The resurrected hero avoids the crowd and his people, again an allusion to Jesus who appeared only to a chosen few after resurrection. He goes up the mountain, tills the soil and sows the varieties of seeds that he had collected in the underworld. They range from ridge gourd, ash gourd, snake gourd, pumpkin and brinjal. In addition he also grows a jasmine plant. The man has thus taken up a spiritual journey which has given him insight, wisdom, or knowledge of the sacred. He creates the garden of Eden – a world centre. In the Christian myth, the dying God is often associated with fertility. Christ can be seen as bringing fertility, though of a spiritual as opposed to physical kind.

After the death of her husband, the widow has to fend for her life and safeguard her only daughter. One day the child is hungry, and seeing no food available, the mother takes the girl up the hill to see if she can uproot any food.

As they are ascending up the mountain they hear the song of a man playing his flute and singing his story of betrayal. The child tells her mother that the song that they are able to listen to and the music from the flute reminds her of her father. But the widowed mother who had been confirmed of her husband's demise does not believe in it. She wonders if it is only the singing of a bird and not a human. The wife's doubting is parallel to 'doubting Thomas'.

The resurrected man, upon seeing his wife and child, approaches them. He introduces himself as a cultivator whose rage field has yielded, but he has no helper to reap the grain. He requests them to bring ten labourers to work in his field and also bids them to accompany them. He will be able to supply them with corns. You find here again an allusion to the Bible. Like the resurrected Christ who has opened the door of life to mankind, the hero invites the common man into his Garden of Eden.

They go back to the village and take with them ten men to work in the ragi fields. While the agriculturalist employs all those men in his fields, he employs the mother and the child to cook food for him. When the food is prepared he invites them to feast with him, allusion to the last supper, and also gives them jasmine flowers to wear on their hair. All the ten labourers and also the mother and child are given ragi corns to take home with them.

The workers are happy and as they descend the mountain their kith and kin marvel at their luck. For there is now a hard hit famine in the village and people are starving. The plight of the two brothers of the lady and their family members is now pathetic.

The brothers are shocked to see their widowed sister, whose hair is now decorated with jasmine. The allusion again is to the crown that God would offer the righteous people for the rest of their lives. While all those who helped the agriculturalist lead a prosperous life, the lady's brothers and their family members live a long life of misery and suffering and nearly starve to death.

This simple story retold by the Irula women resound with the lovely tune and rhythm, alliteration and assonance, reminding us of God's eternal reward in heaven and the eternal punishment that

would follow the sinners. It is quite interesting to listen to their ballads which should be accompanied by compulsory nodding of heads by the listeners now and then. The singers are always two in number, one reciting and the other repeating it line by line. The one who sings requests her listeners to say “Ah, Oo” now and then, in order to encourage her singing.

Although none of the Vettakada Irulas have been influenced by Christianity, it is surprising that their ballad reflects a Christian theme.

Tribals of Attapady in Palakkad district, crowd before TV sets every evening to listen to a news bulletin in their mother tongue, Irula. While this channel has a general content of entertainment like any other channel, it is also the voice of the voiceless and marginalised tribals. There are a number of infotainment programmes which are shot with the participation of tribals. But pride of place is given to the Irula news broadcast. Two Irula women, Kali K. and Rangamma M. of Naikkampadi Ooru, do the reporting and news anchoring. Rangamma is a graduate in botany and Kali has a Teachers’ Training Certificate. They visit far-flung tribal hamlets to cover issues like malnutrition and ecological fragility. They also translate into Irula the channel’s news reports in Tamil and Malayalam and broadcast the bulletin from the studio in Agali at 6.30 p.m.

The elders in the tribal hamlets are the biggest fans of the Irula news bulletins. Many of them who cannot follow Malayalam news bulletins can now understand all that is being said. Even educated and well-to-do tribals are really thrilled to hear the news in their own language. This is a great step towards preserving their language. Going by the response from the tribal community, the news bulletin has emerged as the true voice of the downtrodden adivasis. They now pray that this voice will never cease to be heard.

The viability of a language is determined first and foremost by the general attitude of its speakers towards their heritage culture, of which their language may be considered the most important component. In this respect, the intergenerational transmission of the language, i.e. teaching the children the heritage language, is the most important feature of language vitality. It is also necessary to further the documentation, description, maintenance, and revitalization of this threatened and endangered language, and to educate the public about the causes and consequences of language extinction.

There is a pressing need to document the Irula language, as it would help to play important roles in the future of the speech communities, for example, with regard to human rights issues and questions related to cultural identity and survival. Language loss leads to the irrevocable loss of human cultural heritage. Thus, endangerment of languages raises concerns among linguists, as languages are important sources for speakers’ identity as well as for scientific research. The loss of each language reduces the linguistic diversity of the world, regardless of the reasons why people abandon their language and regardless of whether they adopt another local language, an official state language or an international language.

The study of endangered languages can be considered against a background related to the general value of preserving existing cultural diversity. Every culture represents an experiment in the survival of a unique and alternative way of life, of solving or evading problems. Loss of cultural diversity is therefore a loss of experience and knowledge that has proven its potential usefulness for mankind in general. Languages, besides being part of a people’s cultural heritage, constitute a

complete and complex reflection of it. The loss of a language entails the loss of cultural heritage. The documentation of languages is thus also central to ethnobotany, ethnomedicine, and to the study of ritual and oral traditions.

Reviving the endangered Irula language and bringing this tribal language into the mainstream of national languages would help in ushering them into new frontiers in education and economic status, which in turn would introduce them to the advancements of the outside world. The Irula language needs to be documented and safe guarded from extinction to bring a new identity to the language and the tribe.

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