
UNIT 4 TRIBES OF TAMIL NADU

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit gives a description of the tribes of Tamil Nadu State which is a part of South India. It provides information about their origin, social, cultural and economic characteristics and their present status with the object of developing an understanding in the learner about the distinct features of the tribes located in the heart of the nation. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Describe the tribal areas of Tamil Nadu;
- Trace the origin of the tribes and understand their culture and occupation;
- Understand the different tribes of the region and their social, economic and cultural characteristics;
- Discuss the social hierarchy of the people in Tamil Nadu; and
- Outline their present status in terms of literacy, occupation, etc.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Tribes of Tamil Nadu are mainly found in the district of Nilgiris. Of all the distinct tribes, the Kotas, the Todas, the Irulas, the Kurumbas and the Badagas form the larger groups, who mainly had a pastoral existence. The men from each family of this tribe are occupied in milking and grazing their large herds of buffaloes; a very common form of pastoral farming. This tribe is distinguished by their traditional costume; a thick white cotton cloth having stripes in red, blue or black, called puthukuli worn by both women and men over a waist cloth. They settle mainly in Munds, comprising of five-six typical wagon shaped, windowless split bamboo, reeds and thatch huts. They do not worship any God and their consciousness is cosmic.

4.2 ABOUT TAMIL NADU

Tamil Nadu lies in the south-eastern region of the Indian sub- continent. The region is home to one of the most ancient cultures of India. The official language spoken in the state, Tamil, is considered to be one of the oldest literary languages to be still existing

after Sanskrit. It is believed that the age of Tamil Nadu, as a culturally rich ancient region dates to about 2000 years. It was believed that the Indians had settled in the Tamil region around 1500 B.C. to 600 A.D. The Tamils have been referred to as the last surviving classical civilization on Earth.

Tamil Nadu and its people belong to the Dravidian group of families who inhabited India in the very early centuries. The Tamil people or Tamilians are an ethnic group of people belonging to the southern eastern part of the country. Tamil, being the official language of the state, is also spoken by other tribes in and outside the region, such as Sri-Lanka and also within the state of Andhra Pradesh. No doubt, Tamil Nadu is home to one of the largest population of tribes, their numerous language, customs and cultural traditions in India.

During the colonial rule of the East India Company, British colonists consolidated the Tamil territory in southern India into the Madras Presidency, which was then integrated into British India. Similarly, the Tamil parts of Sri Lanka were joined with the other regions of the island in 1802 to form the Ceylon colony. Tamils live throughout India but particularly in southern states neighbouring Tamil Nadu such as Karnataka, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh as well as Maharashtra. When India became independent in 1947, Madras Presidency became the Madras State, comprising present-day Tamil Nadu, coastal Andhra Pradesh, northern Kerala, and the southwest coast of Karnataka. The state was subsequently split along linguistic lines. In 1953, the northern districts formed Andhra Pradesh. Under the States Reorganization Act in 1956, Madras State lost its western coastal districts. In 1968, Madras State was renamed Tamil Nadu and today the state capital is known by the name 'Chennai'.

In the first part of this unit we shall study in detail the various tribes that constitute more than half of the population of the Tamil region in the south eastern part of India.

4.3 TRIBES OF TAMIL NADU

The Badagas

They belong to the backward class and are not classified as tribals. They comprise of an agricultural community and settle near Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu. They are engaged in tea cultivation and potato growing. They speak a language which is a mixture of Tamil and Kannada language.

They form the largest group of tribes and boast of a rich oral tradition of folktales, songs and poetry. These tribes are Hindus and belong to the Shiva sect. The Badagas celebrate the Hindu festivals such as Diwali, and the famous festival of Pongal.

The Irulas

These tribes of Tamil Nadu occupy the lower slopes and forests at the base of the Nilgiri hills. This tribe is famous for snake catching and removing the venom. It is often said that the people of these tribes are called upon whenever a native require any medical / herbal assistance. They are the second largest group of tribes after the Badagas and they are largely similar to the Kurumba tribe of Tamil Nadu. This tribe produces honey, fruits, herbs, roots, gum, dyes etc., and trades them with the people in the plains. They are also gradually changing from their earlier ways of hunting to a more modern form of living.

The Kotas

They are mainly concentrated in the Tiruchigadi area in the Nilgiris Hills. They are distinguished by their colourful folk dances and are basically musicians. They are mainly engaged in producing handicrafts. These tribes of Tamil Nadu are expert iron smiths, potters and carpenters. Their population is very small and they live in huts that have a living and sleeping area and a place of worship. Their language is similar to that of the Badagas. They speak Tamil and a form of Kanada language.

The Kurumba

The Kurumba tribes of Tamil Nadu inhabit the intermediate valleys and forests around villages. They are famous for their black magic and witch craft, and in the past were believed to be performing sacrifices as part of the voodoo magic. Primarily, they were engaged in hunting and gathering for their living, but gradually shifted to cultivating and working in coffee and tea plantation.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Briefly discuss the Irula tribe found in Tamil Nadu.

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4.4 SOCIAL HIERARCHY OF TRIBES IN TAMIL NADU

Besides the tribes which have been discussed above, Tamil Nadu also encompasses a rich culture of scheduled tribes and scheduled caste population. Being one of the oldest regions inhabited by the Indians, the Tamil region too was a victim of the Hindu caste system in India. The origin of the caste system, is believed, by some to be divinely ordained on human beings. Essentially, caste system was a mechanism through which the society was segregated, initially based on occupational differentiation, but later on became a rigid framework, which unfortunately, is prevalent till date.

The people of Tamil Nadu, primarily follow Hinduism, but animism and witchcraft is also prevalent among the tribals. The oppressive caste system got firmly entrenched and as a result, the society was divided into four major divisions:

1. The Brahmans

The first level or at the top of the hierarchy of the Caste system comprises of the Upper Caste Brahmins, who are mainly priests, carry out religious rites and rituals. They form the highest decree of the caste system in Tamil Nadu. This particular group in the Caste system enjoys the highest form of respect in the society.

2. The Kshatriyas

The Kshatriyas constitute the second highest level of the caste system in Tamil Nadu. They are warrior lords and princes, who take care of the provinces and rule the kingdom. In short they constitute the ruling military group in the Hindu Vedic system.

3. The Vaishyas

According to the Hindu belief, the Vaishyas, along with the Kshatriyas are considered to be the twice born castes in the Hindu religion. The Vaishyas are that section of the caste system in the Tamil region who are given the authority to grow crop i.e. cultivation, rear cattle, and indulge in trade works.

4. Dalits

This section of people of the caste system in Tamil Nadu includes the lower laborers who are succumbed to racial discrimination in the society. During the early ancient periods, these dalits were considered untouchable. They are prohibited to touch anything which belongs to the other three upper castes.

The dalits of Tamil Nadu constitute rural Dalits who worked as agricultural labourers for caste landowners without remuneration. The majority of bonded labourers were Dalits. Dalits, among the poorest of citizens, generally did not own land, and often were illiterate. They faced significant discrimination despite laws to protect them, and often were socially prohibited from using the same wells and from attending the same temples as caste Hindus, and from marrying caste Hindus. In addition, they faced social segregation in housing, land ownership, and public transport. Many of the tribes in Tamil Nadu have numerous numbers of Dalits in its rural areas. It is unfortunate to say, that the dalits still exist in the Indian society and the discrimination of these Dalits are still prevalent in many parts of the country.

Under this section, Tamil Nadu has many other caste groups which fall under the category of Dalits. They are as follows:

- a) **Pallan:** The Pallan are an ancient community, engaged extensively in wet land farming and distributed mainly in Thanjavur, Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts of Tamil Nadu. They are mostly agriculturalists in Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and amongst the Tamil diaspora. They are also known as 'Devendra Kula Vellalar'. Pallars also called with the title 'Kudumban' after their names.
- b) **Paraiyar or Pariyan:** This particular section of the caste group in Tamil Nadu is known with different names in different regions of the Tamil State. In the northern region they are called as Paraiyars and in the southern region they called as Sambavar or samban. This paraiyar caste is considered to be one of the oldest tribal groups of ancient India, who thrive in the southern part of the Indian sub-continent today. They are also called as Adi-dravida, which means the earliest Dravidians to have come and inhabited the Indian sub continent.
- c) **Chakkiliyar:** They are known to be one of the most marginalised groups of the Tamil society. According to history, it is believed that the chakkiliyar caste were among the soldiers and did military services for the society but due to social and political changes, they were forced to do menial labor in the military and hence, got branded as part of the lower caste of the society in Tamil Nadu.
- d) **Kallar:** The Kallar caste in Tamil Nadu is known to be one caste which does not succumb to any forms of subjugation. They are an independent caste. Kallars are known to be the oldest immigrants of Neolithic period with Mediterranean racial elements. Kallar, the name itself, denotes "brave people". They had strongly resisted any form of subjugation by the British colonialist in India. Traditionally, they were described as semi agriculturists and semi warriors. They are mostly agriculturists, and are mainly distributed in Thanjavur and Madurai districts and to

a lesser extent in Tiruchirapalli, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli and Pudukkottai districts of Tamil Nadu.

- e) **Maravar:** This section of the society, the Maravars, was a group of courageous people in the Tamil Nadu region. They were involved in almost all the battles and wars which took place in the regions of Tamil Nadu. They are one of the oldest social groups to be mentioned by the Sangam Tamil literature.
- f) **Agamudaiyar:** This group belongs to one of the three clans of Mukkulathor caste in Tamil Nadu. They are an endogamous part of the Tamil caste system. They were mainly landlords or householders in the society. They were usually involved in performing professions of attending to the businesses’ of the kings in courts or the kings’ interior palaces or pagodas.

In the above discussion, the details of the various tribal groups of Tamil Nadu along with the various caste groups, has been discussed; but there are still many other tribal groups and castes which are eminently unnoticed in all the regions of Tamil Nadu. There are in fact various other tribal groups which have not yet been recognised by the Indian Constitution or whose existence is uncertain to us. Tamil Nadu, as a whole, is one of the earliest regions occupied by the Indian people, the Dravidians. It is a fact that Tamil Nadu is one of the richest cultural regions in India with various tribals co-existing with the Hindus.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Discuss in brief the Dalit caste found in Tamil Nadu.

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4.5 TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN TAMIL NADU

Having discussed much about the tribes of Tamil Nadu, it is important to observe that this region of South India has a lot to offer in terms of its cultural diversity, of peoples and their languages. As much as the rich culture and amalgamation of people and their lifestyles, the languages spoken by the tribes in Tamil Nadu is as diverse as its tribal population. The languages spoken in some parts of the region are also languages spoken in other parts in other states of India. It is because the Tamil languages are one of the oldest and most widely spoken languages from the ancient time. It is considered to be from a family of Dravidian language, spoken by the first inhabitants of the Indian Sub-Continent.

We shall now look into the various tribal languages of Tamil Nadu.

Adiyan or commonly known as Eravas is spoken in Tamil Nadu and also parts of Kerala. The word Adiyan means “slave” in the Malayalam language. The Adiyans are mostly agricultural labourers.

Allar (Chatans), a Dravidian language spoken in Tamil Nadu mainly in the Palghat regions. The lexical similarity with the Tamil language is about 59% and they are mainly hunters, gatherers, labourers and they believe in a very traditional form of religion.

Alu (Kurumba) mainly spoken in the Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. It also shares lexical similarity with a non standard form of Kannada language. The language is mainly spoken by the scheduled tribe population in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu and they are mainly bee gatherers, tea and coffee labourers, horticulturalists and hunters. They believe in the traditional Hindu religion.

Badaga or Badugu spoken in the Kundur and Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. The language is also the name of the Badaga tribe in the state. It is believed that they are the largest most populated people in the southern most regions and they were agricultural people, who have now relocated to towns and cities and earn from an urban style of employment. They believe in Hinduism especially of the Saiva sect.

Irula or commonly known by different names by the tribes as Eravallan, Irular, Iruliga, Erukala, Yerukala, Irava, Korava, Chensu, Kad, or Urali is a Dravidian language spoken mainly in the districts of Coimbatore, Chengai Anna, Salem, Nilgiri and Periyar.

Besides this, **Jatapu** is also a tribal language spoken in some parts of Tamil Nadu. It is a language spoken mainly by the scheduled tribes. Most of them have adopted Telugu as their mother tongue, since Jatapu language is very similar to that of the Telugu language. They are mostly farmers and forest labourers. All Jatapus are Hindu by faith and they believe in many Gods and Goddesses.

The other tribal languages also spoken in other parts of India besides them being spoken in Tamil Nadu are **Kachchi, Kadar, Kanikkaran, Kota, Kudiya, Kui and Kurichiya.**

Malavedan is a language spoken in the Tirunelveli part of Tamil Nadu and also in the south of Kanya Kumari. It is also a dying language with its major shift to Tamil. The natives of this language were hunters and gatherers but now many are wage labourers. They believe in their traditional religion with a little mix of Hinduism.

Manna-Dora and Mukha –Dora are also two very famous tribal languages spoken in parts of Tamil Nadu and mainly in the southern regions of the Indian –Sub continent. Spoken mainly by the scheduled tribes and the Adivasis, their script is similar to that of Telugu. They follow a form of syncretistic Hinduism and they are mainly agriculturalists.

Another set of tribal languages are **Paliyan and Paniya** spoken mainly in Tamil Nadu by the Adivasis living in the south of that region. They are generally hunters, gatherers, traders, food cultivators and beekeepers. They belong to the Scheduled Tribe group in the India Constitution. Paniya although on the other hand is spoken by the tribes living mainly in Kerala, it is also spoken in the Nilgiri areas of Tamil Nadu. They were mainly agricultural workers and wood cutters.

Tulu is also another language spoken by the tribes of Tamil Nadu. The southwest part of India is known as Tulu Nadu since it has been inhabited by the Tulu people. They are also very much prevalent in parts of Karnataka and Kerala.

Toda, another tribal language spoken by the tribes inhabiting the south of Nilgiri Plateau is a language spoken by the pastoral population. The tribe is named after the language Toda. Their occupation is cattle –herding and dairy works. They follow a very traditional religion known as the Toda religion.

One of the tribal languages belonging to the Indo –Aryan family and spoken by the tribes of Tamil Nadu is the **Saurashtri** language. It is mainly spoken by the people residing in Gujarat but some of them have migrated into the regions of Tamil Nadu and Madurai. Since its strong affections to the Dravidian family of language, this particular Saurashtrian language is now largely spoken by the inhabitants in Tamil Nadu. They engaged in silk trade and hence migrated into the other two regions.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) What do you understand by the Jatapu language spoken in some parts of Tamil Nadu?

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

Tamil Nadu and its people belong to the Dravidian group of families who inhabited India in the very early centuries. The Tamil People are an ethnic group of people belonging to the southern eastern part of the country. Their culture and traditions are diverse and the tribal population of Tamil Nadu inhabits mainly the southern areas of the state. The language of the tribes mostly denotes the names of the tribes prevalent in this region.

The languages spoken in some parts of the region are also languages spoken in other parts in different states of India. It is because the Tamil language is one of the oldest surviving languages from the ancient period. It is considered to be a part of the family of the Dravidian language spoken by the first inhabitants of the Indian Sub-Continent. Tamil Nadu also encompasses a rich culture of scheduled tribes and scheduled caste population. Being one of the oldest regions inhabited by the Indians who followed Hinduism, the Tamil region too, was a victim of the oppressive caste system.

4.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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