

# **A Comparative Study of Irula, Toda, and Kota Tribes in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu**

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## **Abstract**

This article offers a comparative overview of the Irula, Toda, and Kota tribes of the Nilgiris, examining their historical roots, settlement patterns, languages, occupations, and cultural practices (Hockings, 1997). The Irulas are portrayed as forest-based foragers and healers, the Todas as pastoralists centred on sacred buffalo herding, and the Kotas as artisan communities known for craft production and social service roles. Differences in religion, marriage systems, kinship, art forms, and food habits highlight the cultural diversity among the groups. The study also discusses the impact of modernization, including land restrictions, education, tourism, and occupational mobility, which have reshaped traditional livelihoods. While Irulas face displacement and poverty, Todas strive to preserve pastoral beliefs, and Kotas experience significant socio-economic progress. Overall, the tribes reflect distinct adaptive strategies shaped by ecology and heritage, emphasizing the need to preserve their unique traditions within a rapidly changing social landscape.

**Key words:** Irula, Toda, Kota, Tribes and Nilgiris.

## **1. Introduction**

The Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu are home to several indigenous tribal communities, each with distinct traditions, livelihoods, and cultural practices (Nair, 2011). Among them, the Irula, Toda, and Kota tribes stand out for their unique ways of life and their adaptation to both ecological and social changes over time. While sharing the same geographic region, these groups differ in terms of language, occupations, religious practices, and social organization. This article provides a comparative exploration of these three cultures.

## **HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND SETTLEMENTS**

The Irulas are widespread across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, with a notable presence in the Nilgiris. Traditionally, they lived in hamlets called mottas, often on the forested slopes and plains. Their settlements reflect their reliance on agriculture, animal husbandry, and foraging. Historically, they practiced shifting cultivation, later restricted under colonial and postcolonial land regulations, which pushed many into plantation labor. The Todas, in contrast, are a pastoral community confined to the higher elevations of the Nilgiris. Their settlements, called munds, are clustered hamlets located in grassland zones above 1,800 meters. Unlike the Irula, who are spread across various terrains, the Toda settlement pattern is tied specifically to buffalo rearing, which has been central to their livelihood and religious identity. The Kotas, another Nilgiri-based tribe, traditionally occupied the middle ranges near Kotagiri, Ooty, and Coonoor, with Kokkal forming their main settlement. Their villages, called Kokkals, consist of several *keri* (clan units). The Kotas' settlements historically developed around their role as artisans and craftsmen serving neighboring tribes and caste groups. Thus, while the Irula settlements were flexible and adaptive to both forest and plains, Toda villages were closely tied to highland buffalo pastures, and Kota hamlets were structured around artisanal and social service functions within the Nilgiri society.

## **LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY**

The Irula language is considered a Dravidian tongue, influenced regionally by Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam. Subgroups like the Kasaba developed dialectal variations based on geography (Zvelebil, 2001). The language, while distinctive, places Irulas closer to the Tamilspeaking continuum. The Toda language belongs to the Dravidian family but is highly unique, with only a few hundred speakers. Toda cultural identity is deeply tied to language, songs, and chants used in rituals. However, with increased education and modern exposure, Toda speakers often shift to Tamil or English in formal contexts. The Kota language represents a linguistic blend of Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam influences. It has historically developed as a marker of their artisan role, acting as a bridge language between communities. Though endangered, many Kotas today are bilingual or trilingual, maintaining their mother tongue alongside Tamil and English. In essence, while Irula identity is linked more to subsistence and ecological adaptation than linguistic exclusivity, Toda identity is bound tightly to their rare language, and Kota identity lies in their hybrid, service oriented linguistic heritage.

## **OCCUPATION AND LIVELIHOODS**

### **Irulas**

The Irulas have historically been hunter gatherers, snake catchers, and agricultural laborers. They are renowned for their skills in capturing snakes and rats, and today play a crucial role in antivenom production through the Irula Snake Catchers' Cooperative. Women possess rich ethnobotanical knowledge, often serving as traditional healers (*vaidya*). However, legal restrictions on hunting and forest access after the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 forced many Irulas into bonded labor or plantation work.

### **Todas**

The Toda economy has revolved almost exclusively around buffalo herding, which provides milk, butter, and curd—both for subsistence and ritual offerings. Buffalo are not just livestock but sacred beings central to their religion. However, deforestation and shrinking pastures have reduced buffalo populations, compelling many Todas to shift toward education, wage labor, and handicrafts such as embroidery

(Puthukuli shawls). Modern influences, including sports and formal employment, have become increasingly significant.

### **Kotas**

The Kotas were traditionally artisans' blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, and musicians— providing essential services to the Toda, Irula, and Badaga communities. This service function earned them the title of "artisan tribe." In recent decades, with nearuniversal literacy, Kotas have moved into professional jobs, including teaching, medicine, and government service. Still, their artisanal crafts, especially pottery and instrument making, remain a valued cultural hallmark. In summary: Irulas were foragers and healers, Todas were pastoralists, and Kotas were artisans, a neat division of labor within Nilgiri tribal society.

### **Religion, Myths, and Rituals**

Irulas follow animistic traditions infused with Hindu practices. They worship local deities, ancestral spirits, and natural forces. Ceremonies often take place in ancestral shrines (koppamanais). Women's rituals around birth and menstruation reflect older indigenous practices. Todas practice a pastoral religion centered on the sacred buffalo. Priests observe strict rituals, including fasting and purity rules. Ritual objects include sacred pots symbolizing the Pandavas and buffalo head emblems in temples. Their prayers are distinctive—raising the hand skyward with a "shhh" sound. Mythology includes creation stories tied to sacred highlands. Though Christianity has made inroads, traditional practices remain central. Kotas worship without idols, venerating deities like Ayyanur and Ammanur. Ritual purity is symbolized by objects such as the Mandu leaf and Charka Viyugam. Priests maintain spiritual authority, and ancestor worship forms a vital part of their belief system. Exogamous marriage rules reflect their concern with spiritual and social balance. Thus, Irula religion is pragmatic and animistic, Toda faith is buffalocentered and ritualintensive, and Kota spirituality blends ancestral reverence with symbolic purity.

### **Marriage, Kinship, and Social Organization**

Among the Irulas, marriages were once arranged through symbolic rituals like the groom living in the bride's village with a bundle of firewood. Today, a simple ceremony with a tali (sacred necklace) is common. Divorce is permitted under certain conditions, and remarriage practices exist. Families are typically patrilocal, with extended kin playing important roles. The Todas follow clanbased exogamy. Engagements are arranged during childhood, with marriage formalized after conception a unique reversal of the usual sequence. Divorce is absent in Toda society, reflecting the sanctity of marital bonds. Kinship is highly formalized, with elaborate greetings and respect rituals. The Kotas practice clan exogamy as well, with strict rules that marriages occur across keru units. Rites of passage, such as the Moondhal ritual for girls and the donning of the poo nool thread for men, mark transitions to adulthood. Social organization revolves around the Kokkals and their subdivisions. While Irulas allow flexibility, Toda marriages emphasize continuity and tradition, and Kotas institutionalize exogamy within clan divisions.

### **Art, Crafts, and Cultural Expression**

The Irula artistic tradition is modest, centered more on oral traditions, music, and ritual than visual art. Their skills lie in healing, ecological knowledge, and snakecatching. The Todas are worldrenowned for their embroidery. The Puthukuli shawls, with red, black, and white geometric designs inspired by Nilgiri flowers, are both a cultural symbol and an economic asset. Women's cooperatives like Sangamam market these crafts, blending heritage with entrepreneurship. The Kotas excel in crafts such as pottery,

blacksmithing, woodcarving, and musical instrument making. Their artistry is utilitarian yet deeply symbolic, tied to festivals and rituals. Even as younger generations enter white collar professions, these crafts remain vital markers of identity. Thus, Toda art is textile based and symbolic, Kota art is artisanal and musical, while Irula traditions lie more in intangible ecological knowledge.

### **Food Practices**

The Irula diet is simple, once based on millet, honey, and foraged foods, later shifting toward rice and agricultural produce. Meat and fish are consumed, unlike the largely vegetarian Todas. The Toda diet is dairy heavy, centred on buffalo milk, curd, and buttermilk. Ritual feasts include rice cooked in jaggery and clarified butter. While largely vegetarian, ritual buffalo sacrifice once formed part of their culture. The Kota diet is rice based, with chutneys, vegetables, and festival sweets like paniyaram. Communal eating during festivals reinforces social bonds. This contrast highlights ecological adaptation: Irulas as foragers, Todas as pastoralists, and Kotas as agriculturists artisans.

### **Modern Challenges and Adaptations**

Irulas face displacement, loss of forest rights, and poverty due to restrictions on traditional livelihoods. Cooperative snake catching remains one of their few sustainable niches. Education levels remain low, limiting upward mobility. Todas, though few in number, have embraced education and tourism, selling handicrafts and entering professions, but pastoralism declines as land pressures rise. Kotas have seen the greatest transformation, with 100% literacy and widespread entry into modern jobs, though this also risks the erosion of their artisanal traditions.

### **COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF TRIBES**

A comparative perspective on the Irula, Toda, and Kota tribes of the Nilgiris highlights the diverse ways in which indigenous communities experience livelihood vulnerabilities, cultural transitions, and social change. While the Irulas struggle with displacement, loss of forest rights, and limited access to education, the Todas face challenges related to shrinking pastures, declining pastoral practices, and cultural preservation. The Kotas, though relatively advanced in literacy and modern employment, confront issues of cultural erosion and weakening traditional artisanal roles (Payne, 2015; Ambrosino et al., 2017). From a social work standpoint, these variations call for context-specific interventions that strengthen community resilience, protect indigenous knowledge, and promote equitable access to welfare schemes. Comparative analysis enables practitioners to understand how social exclusion, modernization, and policy gaps differently affect each group, thereby shaping tailored approaches for empowerment, cultural sustainability, and inclusive development.

### **DISCUSSION**

After examining with various studies, it was observed that the study by Creswell (2018) emphasized the study's results with established theories and prior research. Neuman (2014) highlights the need to analyse why particular trends emerged, considering context, sample characteristics, and methodological factors that may influence outcomes. Building on this, Payne (2015) argues that discussions in social work research must clearly show how the findings contribute to practice, theory, or policy especially when addressing vulnerable populations. Rubin and Babbie (2016) further stress the importance of acknowledging study limitations such as measurement constraints or sampling issues, which help position the findings within a broader scholarly discourse. Finally, as Ambrosino et al. (2017) note, a well-

developed discussion should link research outcomes to practical social work interventions, demonstrating how professionals, administrators, and policymakers can apply evidence-based insights to improve service delivery and welfare programs.

## CONCLUSION

The Irula, Toda, and Kota tribes represent three distinct yet interconnected strands of Nilgiri culture. The Irulas embody ecological survival skills as foragers and healers; the Todas exemplify ritual pastoralism with their buffalo entered worldview; and the Kotas reflect artisanal creativity and adaptive modernization. Together, they illustrate the diversity of indigenous responses to environment, colonial disruption, and modern change. While modern education and employment have drawn these groups into mainstream society, their traditions remain essential not only for their own cultural survival but also for the heritage of the Nilgiris as a whole. Preserving their languages, rituals, and crafts amidst modernization remains a pressing challenge but also an opportunity to showcase the resilience of tribal cultures in India's plural mosaic.

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