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# Irula Community

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**Why is in news?** Seeking the forgiveness of Kanniamma at dawn by the seashore

It is not dawn yet and the eastern sky is yet to turn crimson. But tens of thousands of Irulas, camping on the Mamallapuram beach adjacent to the iconic Shore Temple, are up and about. They gear up for the most important day of their calendar — the **Masi Magam**.

On this **full moon day** in the **Tamil month of 'Masi'**, Irulas, even those settled in far-off places, gather on the Mamallapuram beach to perform their **annual ritual** to bring back their Goddess Kanniamma, who they believe had left in anger three months ago, leaving them in misery.

Putting behind their tedious journeys to Mamallapuram and a night filled with traditional music and dance, men and women of all ages — from the newborns to the eldest — unite as families to make 'pongal' in earthen pots perched on firewood stoves.

In a unique ritual that unfolds at the dawn, almost every family arranges flowers, betel leaves, lemons, puffed rice, neem leaves, broken coconuts and bananas on the carvings made on the sand, resembling a ladder with seven rungs.

The seven steps symbolise the seven kannigaiyar, whom the Irulas worship since time immemorial. Some include the portraits of 'Kadal Kanniamma' and heap the sand in cone form to represent the Goddess.

By the time the sunlight fills up the beach, tonsure, ear-piercing rituals, and even weddings, happen just a few feet away from the lashing waves.

## Irula tribes:

Irula, also known as **Iruliga**, are a **Dravidian ethnic group** inhabiting the Indian states of **Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka**.

A scheduled tribe, their population in this region is estimated at around 200,000 people.

The Irula **speak the Irula language**, a Dravidian language that is **closely related to Tamil**.

Irular means "dark people" in Tamil and Malayalam, from the root word irul, meaning "darkness".

The tribe numbers around 200,000 spread across three states: 189,621 in Tamil Nadu, 23,721 in Kerala and 10,259 in Karnataka, according to the 2011 census. Those **in Karnataka are named Iruligas**.

The Irulas are **mainly concentrated in northern Tamil Nadu**: in a wedge extending from Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts in the west to Ariyalur and Cuddalore districts in the south and Tiruvallur district in the north. Small populations live in Coimbatore and Nilgiris districts and were classified by Thurston as a different population.

In Kerala, the Irulas are in Palakkad district, while in Karnataka they are concentrated in Ramanagara and Bangalore districts.

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Traditionally, the main occupation of the Irulas has been **snake, rat catching and honey collection**. They also work as **labourers (coolies)** in the fields of the landlords during the sowing and harvesting seasons or in the rice mills. **Fishing and cattle farm** is also a major occupation.

Rats destroy a quarter of the grain grown on Tamil Nadu-area farms annually. To combat this pest, Irula men use a **traditional earthen pot fumigation method**. Smoke is blown through their mouths, which leads to severe respiratory and heart problems.

Irular who live on the mountains **believe that there is a life after death**.

**Vadivel Gopal and Masi Sadaiyan** of the Irula community **received Padma Shri** at a civil investiture ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Both are expert snake catchers and are members of the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society, one of the major anti-snake venom (ASV) producers in India.