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Certain Aspects of Population Structure of Coimbatore Irulas: A Case Study in Perumalkoilpathy, Tamil Nadu*

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ABSTRACT The Irula of Coimbatore was selected for the study of various demographic parameters at the level of exogamous units. An intensive study was conducted among the Irula of Perumalkoilpathy settlement (of Coimbatore district) for this purpose. Analysis was carried out at clan level for various parameters. In this settlement only three clans (Sambar, Karatiga and Parathara) are represented while there are twelve clans among the Irulas of Coimbatore region. The hamlet consists of 38 households with a total population of 182. The clan level data were analysed for different aspects like population composition, sex ratio, dependency ratio, breeding size, age at marriage, marital distance, inter-clan marriages, consanguineous marriages, inbreeding coefficient, mortality and fertility. It is found that there are similarities with regards to different demographic aspects between the brotherly clans than their alliance clans.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the scholars in their studies on population structure have not attached much importance to the analysis at the level of exogamous unit of a population for various demographic parameters. Hence, there is a need for such micro-level studies, particularly among different tribal populations where exogamous units can easily be identified due to the importance attached to them.

With the afore metioned objective in view, an attempt has been made to study certain aspects of population structure among the Irulas of Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu. Some of the synonyms of Irula are Irular, Iruligar, Iraliga, Eruligam, Kadu Pujari, Vellan, Possali-Pujari etc. (Thurston, 1909). According to Perialwar (1985) Irulas can be divided into five sub groups based on their socio-cultural and dialectical variations. They are 1. Melanadu Irulas, 2. Kasabas, 3. Vettakada Irulas, 4. Uralis and 5. Kadu Pujaris. Irulas are spread over the three Southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The Irula with a population of 1,05,759 occupies a second position with regards to numerical strength in the tribal map of Tamil nadu. Out of all districts of Tamil Nadu where Irulas are spread, Coimbatore districts with an Irula population of 10,659 occupies, fourth positon (in numerical strength of the Irula). Out of the total Irula population in Coimbatore district, 96 per cent are from rural area (Census of India, 1981). Irulas are one of the important tribes of Coimbatore district and they are found in all the taluks of it. The Irulas of Coimbatore claim that they have descended from a person named Koyan, on whose name, Coimbatore city was established (*viz.* Koyan Puttur became Coimbatore).

Irulas of Coimbatore district say they along with the Irulas of Anamalai hills and Attapady valley of Kerala state, form one group. All of them are referred by a common term, 'Vetta Kada' Irulas. Perialwar (1985) has included Irulas of Coonoor taluk (Nilgiri district) in Vettakada Irula category. These people do not have marital relations with the Irulas from other districts of Tamil Nadu.

The Irulas of Coimbatore district can be grouped into two kinds, those living in the reserved forest areas, and those living in the plains. The Irulas living in the plains may

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further be divided into two categories: (1) those residing in clusters (normally composed of some 30 to 60 households in a settlement), and (2) those scattered over in the farms as farm servants.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

For the present study, Perumalkoilpathy, an Irula settlement has been selected. The settlement comes under the jurisdiction of Alandhurai revenue village, Coimbatore taluk, Coimbatore district. The settlement is located in the plains area near the border of Siruvani-Sinnar forest area. The data from this population were gathered during December 1984 and January 1985. Household census material was collected from Perumalkoilpathy alone. While personal interviews wre carried among the Irulas of Perumalkoilpathy, Sadivel and Seengupathy. These two Irula settlements (Sadivel and Seengupathy), are situated in reserve forest area and are located at a distance of 6 and 8 kms, respectively from Perumalkoilpathy.

Perumalkoilpathy : A metalled road runs from Coimbatore city to the Siruvani-Sinnar forest area in the south-western direction. On that road at the 28th km (at Iruttupallam) there is a mud road which leads in the eastern direction to Perumalkoilpathy, which is an exclusive Irula settlement consisting of 38 households with a population of 181.

The Irula refer to their house as Korey. A traditional house has no windows, the main consideration of the people is one of warding off cold winds. They speak their own dialect which is related to Tamil. The staple food among the Irula is Samai (a kind of millet) and rice.

All the women and men in the settlement have their clothing pattern similar to that of other communities around the village. They are traditionally food gatherers and hunters. Later they turned to slash-and-burn cultivation. Now they have adopted agriculture as their principal economic activity. Other subsidiary occupations like food gathering, fishing, animal husbandry, honey collection and poultry keeping are also in vogue. Some of them work as wage labourers.

Land is inherited in the male line. When son gets married, the father usually assists him to construct a new hut (neolocal residence). The parental house is inherited by the last son (ultimogeniture).

Decent Groups and Marriage : Though our intensive study is confined to Perumalkoilpathy, our personal interviews at Sadivel and Seengupathy gave a clear picture of the clans and their marriage transactions among the Coimbatore Irulas.

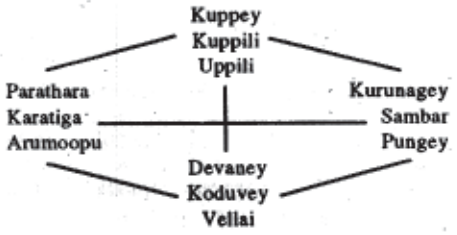
Descent Groups : The Irula is divided into various exogamous and patrilineal units. There are about 12 exogamous sects present among the Irulas of Coimbatore district. We may equate them to clans. The local term for this unit is *Jathi*. The name of these exogamous units are as follows :

1. Kuppey, 2. Sambar, 3. Karatiga, 4. Kurunagey, 5. Devaney, 6. Pungey, 7. Koduvey, 8. Parathara, 9. Kuppili, 10. Uppili, 11. Vellai, 12. Arumoopu

Each *Jathi* in turn is divided into many smaller exogamous units. The local term for this small unit is '*kulam*'. This unit may be equated to a lineage. Clans and lineages are stratified into a heirarchical order. They have a priestly clan by name Vellai. Village headmen are selected only from certain clans. Normally in an Irula settlement, people belonging to two or three clans are present and each clan may be represented by one or two lineages in it. Due to its larger spread, the clan is not of functional significance in day-to-day life, though it has its importance in certain contexts. For them lineage is the viable unit for all practical purposes. Lineage head occupies an important place and is called as Guruvan or Kula guruvu. He should assist the lineage member in identifying lineages and clans with whom it is proper to contract marriages.

Every person is considered to belong to the lineage of his or her father. A women, even after her marriage retains the same lineage membership of her father-genitor. If a non-Irula marries an Irula woman, he is assigned to anyone of the lineages that has marital relations with the mother's lineage.

Marriage : Local terms for marriage are 'Madhuvey' and 'Tharamoortham'. They have set pattern of alliance relations. Three clans form into a group and exchange brides with the other three groups. The clans within a set can be referred as brotherly clans. Members with such brotherly relations are known as *Thayandhis* (or *Pangali*). While other groups of clans stand at alliance relationship to it. The clans which exchange spouses are *Sambaradhunga* (or *Mama machan*) to one another. This may be represented in the following way.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The hamlet consists of 38 households with a total population of 182. Mainly we come across three clans in the settlement. They are Sambar, Parathara and Karatiga. 14 households with a population of 68 form Sambar, while Parathara consists of 9 households with a population of 41. Karatiga clan encompasses 12 households with a population of 61. Besides these, there are three households with a population of 11. As the people belonging to these three households are not able to identify themselves to any clan, they have not been considered for analysis in this paper. Hence, the analysis is confined to only three clans (Sambar, Parathara and Karatiga).

Population Composition : Old people are found to be relatively less in number than young poeple in all the three clans. Whether we consider the populaion of individual clans or of total settlement (combining all clans) we get a picture of growing population with relatively more number of young idividuals (Table 1).

Sex Ratio : Equal number of males and females are found in Sambar clan while it is distorted in the other two clans. Sex ratio is found to be less in Parathara while in Karatiga it is more (Table 2).

Dependency Ratio and Breeding Size : Male dependency ratio is found to be relatively higher than the female dependency ratio among all clans. The dependency ratio is found to be highest in the Parathara for both males and females among the three clans (Table 3). Breeding size (people belong to age group 15-49 yrs) is found to be highest in Karatiga (49.18) and lowest in Parathara (41.46) among the three clans (Table 4).

Age at Marriage : Karatiga men showed higher average age at marriage than the others while Parathara women show higher mean age at marriage than the other women from two clans (Table 5).

Marital Distance : Two thirds of the marriages of Karatiga and Parathara have been performed within the village itself. While only 35.71 per cent of the marriages of Sambar are of intra-village type. Accordingly, we come across highest mean marital distance in Sambar clan among the three clans (Table 6).

Inter-clan Marriages : Out of the 14 brides received by Sambar clan, 8 are from Karatiga and 6 are from Parathara. In reciprocity Karatiga received 12 brides from Sambar while Parathara received 19 brides from Sambar. Brides exchange is seen relatively more between Sambar and Karatiga rather than between Sambar and Parathara.

Consanguineous Marriages : A few studies on consanguineous marriages among the Irulas of Tamil nadu have been carried by

Chakravartti (1968), Roychoudhury (1980), Saheb and Bhanu (1984) and Reddy (1985) have found that 49.98 per cent of the marriages among North Arcot Irulas are of consanguineous. Reddy (1985) found that 46 per cent of Nilgiri Irula marriages are of consanguineous type. While, Chakravartti (1968) found only 24.13 per cent of the Madras Irula marriages to be consanguineous. Roychoudhury (1980), basing on census material, estimated consanguinity to be 38.90 per cent among the Tamil Nadu Irula marriages.

In the present study, we come across high inbreeding. Of the total Irula marriages (35) in Perumalkoilpathy, 57.14 per cent are consanguineous. The autosomal and sex linked inbreeding coefficients are esimated to be 0.0446 and 0.0643, respectively. Table 7 gives clan wise frequency of consanguineous marriages and inbreeding coefficients. The frequency of consanguineous marriages is found to be lowest in Sambar clan (42.86%) among the three clans. While consanguineous marriages occur with equal intensity (66.67%) among Parathara and Karatiga clans.

Fertility : Mean number of pregnancies is found to be higher in Parathara whereas the

Table 1 : Clan-wise population composition

Age Group	*Males*			*Females*			*Total*		
	Sa *N* *(%)*	*Ka* *N* *(%)*	*Pa* *N* *(%)*	*Sa* *N* *(%)*	*Ka* *N* *(%)*	*Pa* *N* *(%)*	*Sa* *N* *(%)*	*Ka* *N* *(%)*	*Pa* *N* *(%)*
0 - 4	5	3	3	4	5	3	9	8	6
	(14.70)	(10.34)	(13.64)	(11.76)	(15.62)	(15.79)	(13.23)	(13.11)	(14.63)
5 - 9	3	6	6	4	8	4	7	14	10
	(8.82)	(20.69)	(27.27)	11.76)	(25.00)	(21.05)	(10.29)	(22.95)	(24.39)
10 -14	5	3	1	3	2	3	8	5	4
	(14.70)	(10.34)	(4.54)	(8.82)	(6.25)	(15.79)	(11.76)	(8.20)	(9.76)
15 - 19	3	3	2	4	3	-	7	6	2
	(8.82)	(10.34)	(9.09)	(11.76)	(9.38)		(10.29)	(9.84)	(4.88)
20 - 24	3	3		4	3	2	7	6	2
	(8.82)	(10.34)		(11.76)	(9.38)	(10.53)	(10.29)	(9.84)	(4.88)
25 - 29	5	2	2	3	3	4	8	5	6
	(14.70)	(6.90)	(9.09)	(8.82)	(9.38)	(21.05)	(11.76)	(8.20)	(14.63)
30 - 34	1	2	2	2	1	1	3	3	3
	(2.94)	(6.90)	(9.09)	(5.88)	(3.12)	(5.26)	(4.41)	(4.92)	(7.32)
35 - 39	2	2	3	2	3	-	4	5	3
	(5.88)	(6.90)	(13.64)	(5.88)	(9.38)		(5.88)	(8.20)	(7.32)
40 - 44	2	2	-	2	3	1	4	5	1
	(5.88)	(6.90)	-	(5.88)	(9.38)	(5.26)	(5.88)	(8.20)	(2.44)
45 - 49	1	3	1	2	-	-	3	3	1
	(2.94)	(10.34)	(4.54)	(5.88)	-	-	(4.41)	(4.92)	(2.44)
50 - 54	2	-	-	1	1	-	3	1	-
	(5.88)			(2.94)	(3.12)		(4.41)	(1.64)	-
55 - 59	1	-	1	1	-	1	2	-	2
	(2.94)		(4.54)	(2.94)		(5.26)	(2.94)	-	(4.88)
60 - 64	1	-	1	2	-	-	3	-	1
	(2.94)		(4.54)	(5.88)			(4.41)	-	(2.44)
Total	34	29	22	34	32	19	68	61	41
	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)

Sa = Sambar, Ka=Karatiga and Pa= Parathara

Table 2 : Sex ratio among three clans

Name of the clan	*No. of households*	*Population*	*Sex ratio**
Sambar	14	68	100
Karatiga	12	61	110
Parathara	9	41	86

* Number of Females per 100 males

Table 3 : Dependency ratio among three clans

Sex	*Dependency Ratio*		
	Sambar	*Karatiga*	*Parathara*
Male	1.125	1.071	1.444
Female	1.000	1.000	1.375
Total	1.060	1.033	1.412

Table 4 : Breeding size among three clans

Sex		*Breeding Size*								
		Below 15 Years			*15 - 49 Years*			*Above 50 years*		
		Sa	*Ka*	*Pa*	*Sa*	*Ka*	*Pa*	*Sa*	*Ka*	*Pa*
Male	%	38.24	41.38	45.45	47.06	48.28	40.91	14.70	10.34	13.64
	N	13	12	10	16	14	9	5	3	3
Female	%	32.35	46.88	52.63	50.00	50.00	42.11	17.65	3.12	5.26
	N	11	15	10	17	16	8	6	1	1
Total:	%	35.29	44.26	48.78	48.53	49.18	41.46	16.18	6.56	9.76
	N	24	27	20	33	30	17	11	4	4

Sa : Sambar, Ka: Karatiga and Pa: Parathara

Table 5 : Average age at marriage among different clans

Clan name	*Male*	*Female*
	Mean ± S.E	*Mean ± S.E*
Sambar	20.36 ± 0.52	15.86 ± 0.65
Karatiga	20.83 ± 0.66	15.42 ± 0.45
Parathara	20.56 ± 0.65	14.11 ± 0.48

Table 6 : Village endogamy and mean marital distance among three clans

Clan name	*Village Endogamy (%)*	*M.M.D.**
		Mean ± S.E.
Sambar	35.71	4.68 ± 1.53
Karatiga	66.67	1.08 ± 0.56
Parathara	66.67	0.88 ± 0.29

* MMD = Mean Marital Distance

mean number of live-births is found to be higher in Karatiga. However, Prathara ranks highest in case of average number of surviving offspring among the three clans (Table 8).

Mortality : We could not record abortions and miscarriages in Sambar clan. We come across higher mean number of abortions and miscarriages and infant mortality in Parathara than the other clans (Table 9).

We find higher levels of fertility (pregnancies and living offspring) and mortality (foetal loss and infant mortality) among Parathara than the other clans (Tables 8 and 9).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. The analysis of age composition reflects the pattern of typical Indian growing population.

2. Male dependency ratio is found to be higher in all clans than female dependency ratio.

3. Sex ratio is different among Parathara and Karatiga unlike in Sambar clan.

4. Much variation is not observed with regards to age at marriage among three clans.

5. The percentage of village endogamy (in marriages) is found to be higher in Karatiga and Parathara than Sambar. As a result, the mean marital distance is found to be higher in Sambar than the other clans.

6. The frequency of consanguineous marriages is found to be higher in Karatiga and Parathara than Sambar. First cousin marriages are found to be common in all the clans unlike uncle niece marriages.

7. Consanguinity and village endogamy in

Table 7 : Pattern and prevalence of consanguineous marriages and inbreeding coefficients among three clans

Clan name	*Consanguineous Marriages*				*Non-consanguineous marriages*	*Total*	*Mean inbreeding Coefficient*	
	Uncle niece	*First cousin*		*Total*			*Fa*	*Fx*
	N (%)	*MBD N(%)*	*FZD N(%)*	*N(%)*	*N(%)*			
Sambar	-	6 (42.86)	-	6 (42.86)	8 (57.14)	14	0.0268	0.0536
Karatiga	2 (16.67)	4 (33.33)	2 (16.67)	8 (66.67)	4 (33.33)	12	0.0521	0.0625
Parathara	3 (33.33)	3 (33.33)	-	6 (66.67)	3 (33.33)	9	0.0625	0.0833
Total	5 (14.29)	13 (37.14)	2 (5.71)	20 (57.14)	15 (42.86)	35	0.0446	0.643

FA : Autosomal inbreeding coefficient
Fx : Sex-linked inbreeding coefficient

Table 8 : Fertility measures among three clans

Clan name	*N*	*Pregnancies*	*Live-births*	*Surviving Offspring*
		Mean ± S.E.	*Mean ± S.E.*	*Mean ± S.E.*
Sambar	14	2.43 ± 0.42	2.43 ± 0.42	2.21 ± 0.36
Karatiga	12	3.50 ± 0.63	3.42 ± 0.61	2.09 ± 0.60
Parathara	9	3.67 ± 0.81	3.11 ± 0.59	2.33 ± 0.55

Table 9 : Mortality measures among three clans

Clan name	*N*	*Abortions and miscarriages*	*Infant mortality (below one year)*
		Mean ± S.E.	*Mean ± S.E.*
Sambar	14	0	0.21 ± 0.15
Karatigar	12	0.08 ± 0.08	0.58 ± 0.28
Parathara	9	0.56 ± 0.55	0.78 ± 0.43

marriages are found to be higher among the brotherly clans of Parathara and Karatiga than their alliance clan Sambar. This may be due to the higher concentration of Sambar people at a given place (*e.g.* Perumalkoilpathy) than the sparsely distributed Parathara and Karatiga clans.

8. In general the fertility is found to be low in all the groups. This may be due to the practice of natural methods of birth control besides permanent sterilization methods.

9. The average rates of prenatal mortality and infant mortality are found to be very low. This may be due to their recall lapse.

10. In general, it appears that there are certain similarities with regards to demographic aspects between the brotherly clans of Parathara and Karatiga than their alliance group Sambar. It may have an indirect effect on the population structure of the Irula. Further studies on these lines may provide useful information on the Irula social organization and population structure.

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