Living with small mammals [Commentary]

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17 Feb 2026 Karnataka Indigenous Knowledge

https://india.mongabay.com/2026/02/living-with-small-mammals-commentary/

- *The Iruliga Adivasi people of southern Karnataka have a unique relationship with small mammals, traditionally hunted for food.*
- *Hunting small mammals, particularly many rodents, for eating, is not merely a dietary choice but a tradition that has been passed down through generations, symbolising resilience and adaptability, writes the author of this commentary.*

See All Key Ideas

Small rodents including rats have shared spaces with human civilisation for a long time as they live in proximity to people using the food, water and habitat shaped by human societies. References to rodents abound in folklore, stories, and often in negative idioms or phrases in multiple languages.

While rats and other small rodents are widely recognised for the damage they cause, in some societies, they also are integral to daily lives. See for instance the worship of *Karni Maata* in Rajasthan, where rats and other small rodents hold a special significance in temples. In many tribal and rural communities, rats and other small rodents are also viewed as a source of food, with their consumption being welcomed and encouraged, especially since they are not considered endangered yet and they are appreciated for their taste and are an integral part of local diets.

Rats and other small rodents are very unique animals in the world of the Iruliga Adivasi people.

The Irula or Iruliga are one of the Adivasi communities of Karnataka and are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) under the Indian Constitution's affirmative action provisions in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In Karnataka, the Iruligas are included in the state ST list which identifies 50 ST communities. Among these at least 12 communities including the Iruliga self-identify as Adivasi ('first people' in many Indian languages). As per the 2011 census reports, 10,259 Iruliga live in Karnataka, majorly living in Ramanagara and urban districts of Bengaluru and constitute a small portion of the state's total population (around 61 million people) and an even smaller segment of the state's Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (around 4 million people).

Members of the Irula community hunt rodents in Ramanagara district. As per the 2011 census reports, 10,259 members of the Iruliga Adivasi community live in Karnataka, majorly in Ramanagara and urban districts of Bengaluru. Image by Krishnamurthy K.V.

There are many theories about the origin of the word "Iruliga". Some say it originates from *irulu* (darkness in many south Indian languages), while others trace it to *ili* (rat in Kannada), possibly a reference to the widely held view that Iruligas typically hunt and subsist on rats and other small rodents. However, in areas around Bannerghatta (south of Bengaluru in southern India), Iruligas are identified by other communities as *kaadu-poojari* (priests of the forests in Kannada), in recognition of their deep knowledge of the forest especially of medicinal properties of various herbs, their traditional knowledge of animals, rooted in centuries of lived experience.

This traditional knowledge is invaluable for understanding the life of the Iruliga Adivasi and can enhance the comprehension of healthcare practices and traditional wisdom, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation of the culture. This is important because post-colonial Indian writing about Adivasi people too is replete with references to their illiteracy, poverty and "poor" development, often exposing a corrupt colonial gaze on the community and mirroring the foreign gaze of colonial naturalists, historians and administrators, whose writings about the community often defines how it is seen, described and to this day, "administered".

Animals as mounts

In several Hindu communities, the rat is considered sacred due to its role as the Hindu god Ganesha's mount. The rat-mount of Ganesha in some Indian languages is referred to as *mooshik* and *ilachi.* In the Hindu pantheon, Gods and their mounts have a special significance. For instance, another important temple in southern Karnataka, the Maleya Mahadeshwara temple on top of the Maleya Mahadeshwara Betta (abbreviated to MM Hills and located in Chamarajanagar district in Karnataka) is worshiped by several communities including Iruliga, Soliga and other Adivasi communities in southern India. The main deity, Maleya Mahadeshwara, has the tiger as his mount whereas another prominent Hindu God Shiva is depicted with a bull as his mount. Vishnu, yet another Hindu God is often depicted with *Garuda*, an eagle as his mount. In fact, the Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus)* endemic to southern India is often called Garuda in Kannada and other south Indian languages. Many communities across southern India worship a female deity, Maari or Maaramma, often shown mounted on horses. Traditionally, Surya, the sun god in the Hindu pantheon is mounted on horse-driven chariot while Indira is mounted on an elephant. Chamundi, a Goddess sacred to many south Indian communities mounts a lion. Animal mounts for Gods and Goddesses is an important feature in several Hindu communities which in turn shape the followers'

relationships and attitudes towards these animals. In the case of Maleya Mahadeshwara (often referred to fondly by Adivasi followers as Madappa), the mount is the tiger, symbolising his forest-dwelling status. Ganesha, himself having the head of an elephant and the body of a human is a challenge to conceptualise in the modern scientific worldview but as a cultural and mythological symbol carries important significance for followers.

Ganesha is typically worshipped by many caste Hindu communities at the initiation of any ceremony. In contrast, among the Adivasi communities such as the Iruliga, the equivalent is to worship a lump of cow dung with incense and flowers. This simple ritual symbolises initiation for the Iruliga.

The forested landscape of MM Hills. The Maleya Mahadeshwara temple on top of these hills located in Chamarajanagar district in Karnataka is worshiped by several communities including Iruliga, Soliga and other Adivasi communities in southern India. Image by Tumkurameen via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Origins of the Iruliga name

Iruligas have an inextricable relationship with rodents, to such an extent that the community's name itself could have arisen from *Iligaru* (Kannada phrase that could mean mice/mouse people). This might have been the name used by others (non-Adivasi) to refer to the Iruligas, recognising their traditional skill for hunting rats and other small rodents as well as their preference for the animal's meat. However, eating rodents as being exclusive or identifying characteristic of the Iruligas is false and is also sometimes used derogatorily. In the old Mysore region of southern Karnataka consumption of rats and other small rodents was widely prevalent among several communities (except for communities which do not eat meat such as Brahmins and Lingayat) historically. However, it acquired a negative connotation later, and is hence less widely acknowledged. This prompted Siddagangaiah Kambal, the Kannada author, playwright and theatre artist, well known for his translation of plays by Bertholdt Brecht, to ask the provocative question in his Kannada book, *Iligara Sanskruti* (Culture of the Iruligas), as to why all these communities are also not called Iruligas. It is possible that this falsehood of the Iruliga name being derived from rat consumption or hunting could have arisen for referencing us derogatorily by other communities. The explanation of the name is often referenced by scholars who have not carefully verified the origin. More research on this is ongoing.

In my doctoral research on history of the Iruliga, through extensive field work in Ramnagara region of Karnataka state, I have demonstrated that the terminology Iruliga refers to the core or mother root of the *Mara Genasu* (local cultivar of tapioca). It is quite likely that the external upper caste gaze on "rat eating" as an undesirable practice could have led to advancing this practice as an explanation for our community's name. Dr M. Byregowda has described in his literary work *Folklore Study of Iruligas* that Iruligas themselves say that calling them *Iligaru* (rat/mouse people) should be deemed to be a rebuke against them. As a scholar and an Iruliga myself, I can assert based on my fieldwork and interaction with my community elders, that the upper caste exploitative claim that Irularu, Iruligas, and Irulas got their name from eating and hunting rats and other small rodent is false.

An Indian palm squirrel. The word 'Iruliga' may have arisen from 'Iligaru' (mice/mouse people in Kannada), a term potentially used by non-Adivasi folk in recognition of their skill of hunting small rodents. However, eating rodents as an identifying characteristic of the Iruligas is false and sometimes used derogatorily. Image by Hari K. Patibanda via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

Small rodents and the Iruliga

Iruligas possesses extensive knowledge about rats and small rodents, which enables them to hunt them with ease with traditional weapons. Hunting is a family affair, often involving children and young family members both boys and girls. Sometimes, two or three families hunt together. Hunts are typically early in the morning, usually with packed lunch and with traditional weapons such as crowbar, spade, hoe, pick-axe, shovel, and a medium-sized pot with an opening in the middle for blowing air. The neck of the mud pot typically has a tie using a vine/plant. Typically hunting grounds are plantations and fields close to the forests. The one who leads the hunt often leaves a trail of plucked leaves/greens to mark the route. This allows groups to sometimes diverge and later converge or meet ahead in the trail.

The hunting site is based on having seen evidence of rodents. In the case of burrowing small rodents or rats, the main burrow or the *adapa* is first identified. This is dug and the other small burrows around it are covered with stones. A greasy or other raw stick is taken from the ones lying around, its front end is crushed with a stone, saliva is applied to the crushed end, and that end is inserted inside the slightly dug *adapa*. Based on the movement of the stick, the hunters can identify if a snake is present in the burrow. If there's no movement, the stick is then examined for mouse hair. If a rat's presence is confirmed, they dig the burrow a little and see if there is a mud wall made by rats and small rodents to fool any animal or snake that enters the burrow. The dry cow dung, green leaves and dry grass are put in the pot, set on fire and covered with green leaves. Due to this, smoke starts emanating from the pot and immediately, the mouth of the pot is put into the mouth of the dug burrow and the people blow air into it with their mouths. In this way, smoke comes out from the pot and penetrates into the pit. Due to the smoke, any rodents in the burrow rush towards the smaller openings. As these openings are blocked, they come towards the pot, gasping for breath, and fall unconscious. The pot is then pulled back, and the unconscious rats and small rodents are picked up. Their tail and head are held and pulled in a sudden snap to ensure immediate death of the animal upon which they are bagged. At homes, after tearing off the abdominal content, the meat is cooked and eaten. Typically, the tail is burnt and given to the children for its nutritious value.

Iruligas identify several types of rats, all of which may or may not correspond to the species identification by biologists. This unique identification is based on the rats' form, behaviour and other characteristics. For instance, we know of the *sunda,* which is small-sized solitary and non-burrowing rodent that abandons young early. The *sunda is* not eaten. A sub-type of the *sunda*, the *mane-sunda* is also not eaten. The *kallili* or the *twaada*, both largely solitary and breeding only once a year, are eaten.

The *twaada* stores the most grains in its burrow despite not making very deep burrows, breeds once a year, can swim in water and is eaten. A certain sub-type of *twaada*, is the *gupttatte twaada*, which often adopts a crouched and lumpy posture and cannot be eaten. The *twaada* is quite similar in form to *heggana*, which is largely urban/peri-urban, living in close association with crowded human settlements

and is not eaten. Shrews or *moogu-chitika*, are not eaten and deem to be toxic.

The *kallu-kiruka* (loosely translated as the stone-grinder) collects small stones and arranges them around the burrow. Other recognised rodents include the *Hoobaalada ili* (flowery-tailed rat) a communal burrow-living type digging burrows as deep as 8 feet with long routes to and from the burrow, the *beli-kulla* (the short one of the fence) which builds nests much like a bird in fences and the *bellili* (the white rat) with high fat content, all three being edible. There are also regional small mammals, such as *mende ili* of the Magadi region in southern Karnataka, an edible species known for very large groups of up to 300, digging the deepest burrows sometimes up to 10 feet. The *pasare-ili* which forages largely in the mornings and also builds nests from grass and leaves and also burrows is edible. There are some non-edible rodents associated with specific trees, such as the relatively rare *Ippe-marada-ili* (the rat associated with the tree *Madhuca longifolia*, also known as the Indian Butter Tree) and the *Yada* (closely associated with the coconut tree). Similarly, the ubiquitous grey rat associated with peri-urban and crowded human habitations called the *mane-ili* (house rat).

Madhuca longifolia or Indian butter tree. Iruligas identify several types of rats based on form, behaviour and other characteristics, which may or may not correspond to species identification by biologists. The *Ippe-marada-ili* (the rat associated with this tree) is one such example. Image by Dinesh Valke via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0).

In the Iruliga view, these different rodents have diverse ways of life and irrespective of how they look, the ones that are eaten are known for their hygiene. Their behaviour is also distinct. For instance, the main opening of the burrow is often not used as the primary entry. They create numerous openings for their protection and construct elaborate routes within their burrows. They hoard their food in the burrows, and roam around in them. Apart from that entrance, they also prepare hidden entrances. They use these entrances only to save their lives during times of danger. The main entrance is often a misleading one for the external world; even if a stick is inserted into this burrow, it will not go in. Inside many of their burrows there are often separate areas for resting and for urination; defecation is never inside burrows. Some of the resting locations are padded with grass and these locations are kept clean. The hoarding of food is also separately located. Most importantly, the burrows would be so well designed that despite any amount of water flow in the region it will not be able to enter either the room where the food is hoarded or the sleeping room or the urinating room. The Iruliga recognise that most of the rodents we know of are nocturnal, save for few exceptions that forage in the day.

The Iruligas recognise the ability of many rodents to see well both in the dark of the night and during the day. In fact, the elders maintain our own eyesight and ability to hunt may have deteriorated after the advent of the electric lighting and lamps. Our elders also critically reflect on the dependence on watches and clocks for time, saying that our sense of time without watches and clocks was better. They reflect on various other conditioned and instinctual understanding of nature which is depleting with the advent of various devices and technologies.

The Iruliga relationship with rodents is far more than a matter of subsistence or survival; it is a living expression of the community's cultural knowledge, resilience, and worldview. By narrating these

practices from within the community, this commentary challenges the outsider narratives that have long defined us only in terms of poverty, primitiveness, or “rat and other small rodent eating.” Instead, it highlights the sophisticated ecological knowledge, social organisation, and cultural symbolism embedded in our daily lives. As the Iruliga continue to negotiate the pressures of modernity, displacement, and stigma, acknowledging and valuing our practices on our own terms becomes essential. To see rodents only as pests is to miss their deeper meaning in our world; to see the Iruliga only through the lens of deprivation is to miss our creativity, dignity, and strength.

The author is an Iruliga Adivasi person and a first-generation scholar. He is a researcher with the IndiaZooRisk+ project. The piece includes inputs from Iruligas Siddaramu, Venkatachala, Venkatesh, Sahadeva, Krishnamurthy, Muniyappa, Kalaiah, Pamaiah, Mutthaiah, Madamma, Shivanna and elders of the community. It has been translated from Kannada by Sangeetha M and Prashanth N S from Institute of Public Health Bengaluru.

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