

Tribal

Is a House Asking Too Much? — Irula Adivasi Families in Tamil Nadu's Silk District Fight for a Roof Over Their Heads

Explore the plight of 55 Irula families in Sriperumbudur of Kanchipuram district as they fight for basic housing and amenities amidst the grandeur of the Silk City. Despite government schemes, these marginalized communities remain neglected and impoverished.



There is no road, no electricity, no drinking water supply in Irula hamlets of Sriperumbudur.



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Sriperumbudur/Kanchipuram- Kanchipuram, often celebrated as the Silk City of India, is renowned worldwide for its exquisite Kanjeevaram sarees, intricate golden zari borders, and deep-rooted cultural heritage.

The district, a symbol of prosperity and artistry, attracts tourists and traders alike, drawn to its centuries-old weaving tradition.

Yet, beyond the shimmering silk looms and temple

ret, beyond the shimmering silk rooms and temple spires, a starkly different reality unfolds in the Irula hamlets of Sriperumbudur, where survival itself is a daily battle.

Here, families struggle to secure even two meals a day. For many children, the midday meal at government schools is not just an incentive for education but a lifeline against hunger.

While the district flourishes with economic activity, the Irulas remain trapped in a cycle of poverty, landlessness, and neglect, their voices barely heard amidst the grandeur of Kanchipuram's famed legacy.

For generations, the Irula tribal families in Sriperumbudur, have lived on the fringes of society—both literally and figuratively.

Nestled along water bodies in makeshift 10x10 thatched huts, these families battle the absence of basic amenities like electricity, roads, and clean drinking water.

Irulas are one of the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India. In the Northern Parts of Tamil Nadu, Irulas are in a considerable number.

Despite government schemes meant for tribal welfare, they remain trapped in an unending cycle of neglect and deprivation.

Now, their demand for a rightful home has led them to appeal to the Parliamentary Standing Committee for the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, hoping for long-overdue justice.





The settlements are adjacent to water bodies, and as per regulations, the municipality cannot construct roads or provide electricity.



The tiny huts are barely enough to hold clothes and belongings, forcing families to cook outdoors using traditional chulhas (addupu) requiring wood.

The Sriperumbudur Irula People Welfare Association, led by its president Kavitha Thandhoni, has been fighting for the rights of these marginalized families. In a letter addressed to the parliamentary committee, she detailed the plight of the 77 Irula families who were granted pattas (land titles) in 2021 and 2022 in different villages of Sriperumbudur Taluk.

"As a result of our efforts, 51 Irula Tribal Families

AS a RESULT OF OUR EFFORTS, 31 Irula TRIBAL FAMILIES residing at Sivanthangal, Sriperumbudur Chinna Yerikkarai and Sriperumbudur Periya Yerikkarai, pattas have been issued on 16-November-2021 at Katrambakkam Village in Sriperumbudur Taluk. For the 26 Irula Tribal families residing at Chellaperumal Nagar, pattas have been issued on 4-April-2022 at Mannur Village in Sriperumbudur Taluk", Kavitha stated.

More than 1,000 days have passed since these pattas were issued, yet only three houses have been constructed and handed over. Nineteen are still under construction with no clarity on completion, while for the remaining 55 families, construction has not even begun.

"After so much struggle, for the remaining 55 Irula Tribal Families for whom the houses construction has not started, the government has allocated houses under the Kalaigharin Kanavu Illam Scheme in a proceeding dated 22-October-2024 by the Kanchipuram Collector.

But when there is Tamil Nadu Government's ST Housing Scheme and Indian Government's PM-JANMAN Scheme which are specifically designed for Houses Construction for Tribal Families without the beneficiary's share, we are puzzled as to why the houses were allocated under the Kalaigharin Kanavu Illam scheme that calls for the beneficiary's share", Kavitha raises a genuine question.

While the Tamil Nadu government has allocated houses under the Kalaigharin Kanavu Illam scheme, that puts the cost estimation of a single house at Rs.5.62 Lakhs of which Rs.3.50 Lakhs will be the state's share, it requires the beneficiaries to contribute Rs. 2.12 lakh per house—an amount that the economically destitute Irula families simply

cannot afford

cannot afford.

This, despite the existence of central and state government housing schemes such as PM-JANMAN and Tamil Nadu ST Housing Scheme, which do not require a financial contribution from beneficiaries.

The welfare association has urged the government to cover these costs under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funding, given Sriperumbudur's status as an industrial hub.

However, their repeated grievances through CPGRAMS and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) have only resulted in bureaucratic responses with no tangible action.

Irulas are one of the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India.





Children often sleep outside, exposed to the threat of snakes and venomous reptiles specially during the monsoon season.



There are children who are going to school and they do not have proper houses. They do not have a good environment in which they can grow to be a

good citizen.

Surviving on the Edge: A Life of Hardships


The Mooknayak spoke to Surya Mohan K, a volunteer at ARAN Voluntary Organization, which works with the Irula community in Sriperumbudur. He painted a grim picture of their everyday struggles.

“The settlements are adjacent to water bodies, and as per regulations, the municipality cannot construct roads or provide electricity. This has left the Irula families in absolute darkness—both literally and figuratively,” he explains.

Most men in the community work as daily wage laborers at construction sites, while women are employed as domestic helpers in nearby colonies. Their incomes barely range between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 15,000 per month, making it impossible for them to afford the financial contribution required for the housing scheme.

“We have set up a learning center to help children stay in school because, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a massive dropout rate,” Surya adds. “If we don’t intervene, their lives will be no different from their parents, bound by generational poverty.”

The tiny huts are barely enough to hold clothes and belongings, forcing families to cook outdoors using traditional chulhas (addupu) requiring wood. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana is unknown and unreachable for people here. During the monsoons, life becomes even more dangerous.





Children holding solar powered street lights that has been installed recently by ARAN Voluntary Organization.

“The rain floods their homes, and venomous snakes and reptiles crawl into their living spaces,” SuryaMohan describes. “Children often sleep outside, exposed to the elements. We recently installed solar-powered lights to bring some relief, but only a handful of homes have benefited from CSR-funded solar lighting.”

With no streetlights, the settlement plunges into complete darkness by sunset. “Families wrap up their day by 7 PM because there is no light. They have no choice but to sleep early, living in constant fear and uncertainty,” he adds.





Irula families are not just fighting for homes; they are fighting for dignity, security, and the basic right to a decent human life.

A Forced Eviction Looms

Adding to their woes, many Irula families in Sriperumbudur Chinna Yerikkarai and Sriperumbudur Periya Yerikkarai have been served eviction notices due to the Chennai Peripheral Ring Road Project.

“Where will we go with our children?” one of the residents asked helplessly. With no alternative housing in place, displacement is a frightening prospect for these families, who already lack the security of a stable home.



Courts are for litigants, not for lawyers: Justice Chandru's interview on 'Jai Bhim' movie

A Plea for Immediate Action

The letter submitted by the Sriperumbudur Irula People Welfare Association to the Parliamentary Standing Committee for SC /ST Welfare makes an

Standing Committee for SC/ST Welfare makes an urgent plea for intervention:

- An immediate inspection of the housing issue by the committee to verify ground realities.
- Reallocation of housing under schemes that do not require a beneficiary share, as Irula families cannot afford it.
- Proper execution of sanctioned houses, ensuring all 77 families receive their rightful homes.
- A comprehensive rehabilitation plan for families affected by the Chennai Peripheral Ring Road Project.

As each day passes without action, the hopes of the Irula community continue to fade. They are not just fighting for homes; they are fighting for dignity, security, and the basic right to a decent human life.

Their struggle serves as a glaring reminder that government schemes mean little if they do not translate into real benefits for those who need them the most.

For the Irula families of Sriperumbudur, the dream of having a safe and stable home is still just that—a dream. Whether the government chooses to fulfill its promises or let yet another marginalized community slip through the cracks remains to be seen.





Who Are the Irulas?

The Irula, also known as Iruliga, are a Tamil ethnic group primarily residing in Tamil Nadu, with smaller populations in Kerala and Karnataka.

Recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, their estimated population is around 200,000, with 189,621 in Tamil Nadu, 22,721 in Kerala, and 10,250 in Karnataka.

INDIA, 2012 IN KERALA, AND 10,200 IN KARNATAKA.

Traditionally, the Irulas have been skilled in snake and rat catching, honey collection, and agricultural labor. Many work as daily-wage laborers in fields during sowing and harvesting seasons, while others engage in fishing and cattle farming.

Despite their rich cultural heritage, the Irula people face severe social discrimination and systemic exclusion. Reports of caste-based violence against them continue to emerge.

In 2020, a girl named Dhanalaxmi was assaulted and denied a Scheduled Tribe certificate by dominant caste groups in her village.

In another case, an Irula man in Dharmapuri was brutally beaten and urinated upon by a mob enraged by his marriage to a Vanniyar woman.

One of the most infamous cases of violence against the Irulas was the custodial torture and killing of Rajakannu in 1993 at Kammapuram Police Station, Tamil Nadu.

This case, fought in the Madras High Court by Justice K. Chandru, resulted in the conviction of police officers and led to the formation of the Palangudi Irular Pathugaappu Sangam in 1996.

This organization has since fought over 1,000 cases, primarily concerning false charges and human rights violations against the Irula community.

Despite such struggles, the Irulas continue to fight for their rights, dignity, and access to basic necessities like housing, education, and employment.