Biography

**Philo Irudhyanath (1916 – 1992)**

Ethnographic writing on the tribal cultures of India had its beginnings in the Colonial period. Missionaries, Government officials and amateur diarists wrote about the indigenous peoples in an attitude oscillating between amusement and horror. As far as the southern states are concerned, figures like Edgar Thurston and Father Chandler have written long texts on the customs of various communities. In the regional languages such accounts however, were few and far between. It was in this context that a Tamil school teacher began publishing articles on the customs, manners and traditions of tribal and nomadic communities in the columns of Tamil periodicals in the post independence period. So prolific was his output that to many Tamilians of a previous generation, the name Philo Irudhyanath still evokes the adivasis. Although there were government agencies collecting information on the Adivasis at that time, it was Philo Irudhyanath, motivated by a personal obsession, who was able to reach remote areas in which these communities lived. He wrote on them with an unparalled empathy and a certain romanticism.

Philo Irudhyanath was born in 1916 in Mysore and studied in Santhome high school in Madras. Even as a student he had been interested in the collection of articles and pictures on the adivasis. His dream then was to meet these people and write about them himself. It was much later when he began working as a school teacher that his ambition came to be realised. It was a chance incident with a Kurivikaari (a tribal group in Tamil Nadu) that set Philo Irudhyanath on his travels in search of the nomadic and the remote. In his *Kaatil en prayanam* (‘My journeys in the jungle’) he recounts the day when he was yet to begin his projects, how he had been bitten by an insect and had developed a bald patch. Anxious for days and unable to go to the doctors, a Kurivikaari came begging at his door. When he stooped to give her the food, the woman noticed the patch and provided him with her indigenous medicine. After using it and in three days, Irudhyanath writes, his hair had grown back. This reinforced early ambition to understand their secrets.

The writings of Philo Irudhyanath are typically cast in the genre of the travelogue. Narratives of personal experiences presented in a way that appealed to the general reader, taking him or her through to locations, which for any reader must have been exotic. It is recommended that anyone seeking to do research on the tribes of the South Indian jungles read “Kaatil En Praayanam”. In this book Irudhyanath describes the ways of the Indian jungle, the precautions to be taken there and warns the reader of the dangers one may encounter, along with information and strategies for the beginner adventurer.

An influential figure in Irudhyanath’s life was Mylai Seeni Venkatasamy, the legendary Tamil literary scholar, who encouraged him to write on the Adivasis. Invoking Sangam literature as a reference, where all the tribes of the south are mentioned, Irudhyanath began his “field trips” on his bicycle.

One must remember that when Philo Irudhyanath began his work it was a period when the tribes of India had been ‘denotified’ but still carried the stigma of criminality. He interacted extensively with many tribes and nomads and was to be loved by them. The nomadic acrobats Kalai Kuthadikal, Kudukudupukararkal, Kuruvikararkal, Therukuthadikal, Narikuravarkal, Paliyarkal, Hosur Kasavas, Nilagiri Todas, Badagars, Kadars, Irulas, Eravalars, Vil Vedargal, Yennadiyas, Marathiars, Pillars, Villiers, Kurumbars, Uraliars were all studied and written about by Irudhyanath.

By the time of his death in 1992, Irudhyanath had published more than five thousand articles in English and Tamil in more than sixty magazines on the different tribes of the country. He wrote prolifically in the pages of *Manjari, Ananda Vikatan, Amudha Surabhi, The Hindu, Puudumai, Ponni, Kalkandu, Kalai, Sakti, Shanthi, Chandraolli, Thendral, Suudeshamitran, Tamizhagam, Illustrated weekly of India, Radio, Ravi, Thuupakki, Thiru Irudhya Thoodhan*. Indeed, in periods of enormous financial difficulties it was the support given by these publications that stopped Irudhyanath from giving up his work altogether.

Irudhyanath recounts how for years his readers were unable to fix his identity. Many wrote to the editors of the magazines he wrote for asking to be told who this writer was. It was when the editor of *Kalai* magazine published an autobiography of Philo Irudhyanath that readers came to know that he was Tamil. This brought recognition and Irudhyanath began being invited to schools and associations to deliver lectures based on his research. In the late sixties he came to be recognised at the state level when he was awarded the Tamil Nadu state award for teachers. In 1978 he won a national award.

Today his collection of photographs, albums, unpublished essays, and research notes have dispersed into numerous hands. Although not considered to be an academic, his works are still referred to in the anthropological departments of Tamil Nadu. A concerted evaluation of the man and his work, however is pending.
Selected Bibliography


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