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Navigating authoritarian citizenship in India: a case study of the Irulars

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the precarious citizenship of the Irulars, a semi-nomadic community from southern India, in the contemporary authoritarian moment in India. Drawing from five months of participatory fieldwork with over 800 Irular families in Tamil Nadu, it foregrounds the experiences of a community whose formal status as Indian citizens stands in stark contrast to their everyday disenfranchisement. This article intervenes in three dominant trends within citizenship scholarship: first, the prevailing tendency to conceptualise citizenship as a formal legal status rather than as social act; second, the correlation between democratisation of former colonies and the liberalisation of citizenship regimes; and third, the scholarly focus on the communal instrumentalization of citizenship laws by the right-wing Indian State as the sole evidence of the autocratic turn in citizenship regulation. This study differently argues that the instrumentalization of citizenship predates contemporary authoritarianism and was embedded in colonial governance, with postcolonial democratisation failing to alter this trajectory. By inviting attention to a citizenship story of a community that is not a religious minority – therefore a community whose formal citizenship is not under threat – the article argues that the social experience of citizenship in the present authoritarian moment is produced through the collusion of a group of actors, including local society and scientific experts, who can be called ‘authoritarian citizens’. These actors, under the guise of democratising efforts, contribute to the maintenance of an authoritarian State that delegitimizes communities like the Irulars.

KEYWORDS

Democratisation;
authoritarian citizens; India;
postcolonial citizenship

Introduction

‘I am considered an outsider in every village I walk past. I am a citizen of India, there is no doubt. But people think I don’t belong here’ (Fieldwork interview, Jakkampettai, July 2022). I recall the words of Lakshmi, one of few female chiefs of a village populated by Irulars, a semi-nomadic community based in south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, many of whom I met in the summer of 2022 and spring of 2023. Some months before our

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meeting, in November 2021, the Irulars were suddenly plastered over local news channels in India. A new Tamil-language movie called 'Jai Bhim' had just released (Chhibber 2022). The movie, directed by S. Gnanavel, told a story of custodial violence against an Irular man Rajakannu who was falsely accused of theft and the travails of his wife as she attempted to navigate a deeply unjust legal system to avenge the death of her husband (Gore 2021). The movie expertly wove together stories of the colonial persecution of the Irulars and the ways in which they are oppressed in postcolonial India.

Indeed, the disenfranchisement of the Irulars is an old story. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Irulars were a purely nomadic hunter-gatherer community whose traditional vocation was snake and rat catching (Sastri 1976). The lifestyles, livelihoods, and world-views of Irulars were intimately tied to nature and their common lands. Perhaps because they challenged colonial hopes of monopolising forest resources, the Irulars were targeted by the notorious Criminal Tribes Act, a colonial legislation that declared that those practiced nomadicism were 'criminals' (Revathi 2019). Although the 1871 law was repealed once India became independent in 1947, its spectres can be heard loudly in the postcolonial legal infrastructure and praxis. Irulars are frequently subjected to caste-based profiling, custodial violence, land grabbing, and cultural affronts (Renke 2008). Under the law, the Irulars are citizens of India. As citizens, they are entitled to elect public officials during elections, receive State benefits, and be able to n and sell land. However, historically, the Irulars have been denied these privileges. 70% of Irulars have been unable to vote even once in independent India (Survey by STEPS, on file with the author), only 4% of the Irulars own land (Naig 2019), and community members are routinely slapped with criminal charges for even attempting to receive identity documents that would allow them to exercise their citizenship rights (Thanaraj 2021).

Although the Irulars are formally citizens of India, they cannot make a claim to the social rights associated with citizenship. Studies show that as of 2021, over 700 false complaints are slapped against Irulars, simply because they belong to the tribal strata (Article-51A, 2021).

Surprisingly, their status barely improved following the release of *Jai Bhim*. Even though a string of philanthropists and civil society agents made a beeline to the community because of the movie (Sivapriyan 2021), many even promising large swathes of funding to help improve the socio-economic conditions of the community, barely any of these commitments have borne fruit. Lakshmi's lament speaks to the ways in which Irulars fight a lone battle against social fissures and economic deprivation, a system that ultimately works to render the Irulars 'less-than citizens' in the Indian State (Field interview in Thindivanam, 2022; Yashar 2005). This article is an attempt to unpack that story of compromised citizenship.

This motivation to study the structures constructing Irular citizenship emerges primarily because the experience of the Irulars challenges the homogenous story traditionally told in scholarly studies of citizenship: that the citizenship project has been one of the 'radical reconfiguration along lines of religious identity and affiliation' (Menon and Bhasin 1998), often tracing these patterns back to the partition of India. In current diagnoses of the state of India's electoral autocracy since the ascent of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, the communal tenor of citizenship policy and its study has only become more virulent. No doubt that scholarly interrogations of the authoritarian State's crackdown on citizenship are crucial. However, it bears noting that such accounts

also run the risk of valorising the autocratic State itself. In other words, they show a proclivity to ignore how those who are not the State make and unmake citizenship in authoritarian polities (Goodman 2026; Sur 2021); those who make people like Lakshmi feel like they don't belong.

This article, in departing both from the communal frame as well as the methodology of treating the nation-State as the focal point, attempts to excavate that untold story about the production of citizenship in authoritarian India. It aims to uncover the discursive, social, and economic tools used to create hierarchies of citizenship in contemporary authoritarian India, the registers in which degrees of citizenship are experienced, and most importantly, the identities (of class, caste, gender, and religion) of the agents who construct these systems of differential citizenship. As Anderson famously asks, this paper probes who lies behind the 'imagined communities' within the universe of Hindu citizens in authoritarian India that someone like Lakshmi is excluded from (Anderson 1983).

Drawing on five months of participatory fieldwork with over 800 Irular families living in two districts in the south Indian State of Tamil Nadu, this article illuminates the process through which the Irulars' citizenship has been made precarious. The piece anchors its argument on political scientist Vortherns (2024) theoretical framework of 'authoritarian citizens', referring to a coalition of non-State agents – from ordinary people to courts to civil society organisations and businesses – who make and unmake citizenship of others (Goodman 2026).

The second section begins by cautioning against the scholarly tendency to prioritise formal legality in the study of citizenship. Instead, it argues for reviving an everyday understanding of citizenship as a bundle of social rights. In doing so, it also identifies key blind spots in political science scholarship on social citizenship and demonstrates how these can be addressed by incorporating methodologies from allied disciplines such as anthropology, as this article does. The third section turns its attention to the evolution of citizenship law in India. It examines how the communal underpinnings of citizenship became overt as India made the leap to democratisation, in this process highlighting how law functioned not only as an instrument of democratisation but as a tool for producing authoritarian Statehood. This section demonstrates how the effects of the law are amplified by the social legalities and legal hierarchies it produces.

The fourth section turns to the case of the Irulars, a Hindu-identifying minority disenfranchised by both colonial and postcolonial States due to their cultural distinctiveness. While Irulars remain citizens on paper, their lived realities point to the limits of formal citizenship and the need to foreground its social and affective dimensions. Section five explores this social experience by analysing the role of three non-State actors – government-appointed experts, local NGOs, and privileged caste communities – who form part of what Vortherns calls a network of 'authoritarian citizens'. Drawing on this concept, the section shows how these actors, often unintentionally, help sustain the authoritarian apparatus of the nation-State. It also highlights how their actions are justified through nativist, decolonial, or democratising discourses that ultimately contribute to the marginalisation of the Irulars.

Citizenship as an everyday social experience

The study of citizenship has long been preoccupied with its normative and political function within the Western liberal order. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, when

citizenship began to be systematically theorised, there was an almost uncritical acceptance of its role in reinforcing democracy.

For scholars such as John Stuart Mill, citizenship was an invitation to engage in the *realpolitik* of the nation-State (Mill 1865). For some groups, citizenship served as a corrective to historical marginalisation and erasure; for others, it offered a pathway to full political participation. A continuation of this normative approach – one that proved especially influential – was British sociologist T.H. Marshall's conception of social citizenship (Marshall and Bottomore 1992). For Marshall, citizenship comprises three dimensions: civil, political, and social rights. Civil rights ensure individuals' negative freedoms, such as freedom of thought, speech, and religion, as well as access to justice. Political rights concern the positive capacity to exercise political power, including the rights to vote, participate in institutions, and hold public office. Social rights relate to access to the material standards of society, encompassing economic welfare and social security. Writing in a post-war Britain shaped by the forces of capitalist restructuring, Marshall advanced his framework as a remedy for acute class inequalities. His formulation remains analytically significant for its emphasis on the material responsibilities of States to their citizens and the connection between those responsibilities and the broader political promise of Statehood.

Despite its influence, scholars soon began to identify significant blind spots in the application of the Marshallian framework. One major line of critique concerns the problematic association the frameworks entrenches between citizenship and democracy. As a particularistic political status, citizenship grants access to State resources exclusively to those classified as citizens, while systematically excluding others (Brubaker 1992). This exclusionary dynamic is not specific to any one form of government; rather, it is a structural feature shared by democracies and autocracies alike. As Chung (2017) observes, Marshallian citizenship fails to recognise that even in an ideal democracy, equal distribution of resources is impossible to achieve. In practice, citizenship is inevitably truncated, interrupted, and selectively upheld (Lohr 2012). Such fragmentation is not an aberration but intrinsic to the institution of citizenship itself, thereby challenging the normative assumption that citizenship is a democratising tool wielded by States.

Another critique directed at the Marshallian framework relates to its emphasis on *western* liberal democracies. No doubt Marshall did not intend to develop a universal theory of citizenship. He wrote in and for a very particular political moment in the United Kingdom. However, the Marshallian framework has been utilised since in a wealth of scholarship. In nearly all of the scholarship that relies on Marshall's taxonomy within political science, law, and international relations, the context is typically confined to Western liberal democracies (Lister 2005; Moses 2019). The allegiance to Western liberal democracies and its association with Marshallian rights does not fully consider how citizenship can be instrumentalized in illiberal democracies or autocracies (Sadiq 2009). More fundamentally, the framework has increasingly been anchored on the 'white, heteronormative, property-owning colonial man' as the ideal citizen (Wynter 2003). When applying it, it is seemingly inconceivable that a western liberal democracy may have to reckon with patriarchal structures, racial minorities who have made homes for themselves in western States, or 'with the rights of those whose lands were colonized, whose way of life was disrupted and whose humanity denigrated by the imperial powers, including, of course, Britain' (Kabeer 2006).

The Marshallian rendition of citizenship, then, shares the same birth defects as the political paradigm of western liberalism from which it was born. Liberalism's fatal error was that 'it did not see Sikhs or Poles, Palestinians or Israelis, Blacks or Wasps, but merely persons, rights-bearing (and, doubtless also, gender-neutral)' (Gray 1988). Mills calls this the 'white ignorance' that insulates the State from its own complicity in global coloniality and capitalism (Mills 1997). The experiences of racialised peoples – whether they had fought in wars for imperial powers, demonstrated loyalty, or maintained strong affective ties to the empire – were rendered irrelevant. They were permanently excluded from the civilised body politic and consigned instead to the status of mere subjects (Fraser and Gordon 1992; Sadiq 2017).

The relationship between imperial and colonial liberal democracies and the institution of citizenship has since been systematically examined, often along geographic lines. Mamdani, for instance, offers a compelling critique of colonial and postcolonial citizenship in Uganda, tracing how postcolonial Uganda adopted a dual system of citizenship that combined formal Western and customary models across urban and rural areas (Mamdani 2002). Mamdani also highlights the fraught recognition politics within racialised groups in postcolonial Uganda and how colonial complicities made and unmade these dynamics. For instance, immigrant Indians in Uganda were commonly perceived by Ugandans as 'sub-imperialists' for their roles in colonial administration (Mamdani 2022). Despite this, they were ultimately abandoned – treated as expendable mercenaries – by both the British colonial regime and the postcolonial Ugandan State. Similarly, Jayal presents a rigorous analysis of how colonialism entrenched communal divisions in conceptions of citizenship in India, culminating in the violent partition of India (Jayal 2013). For both Mamdani and Jayal, the core issue lies in the transplantation of Western liberal democratic models into politically fragmented postcolonial contexts. Yet, in their analyses, the failures of the State tends to occupy a central focus.

One could argue that it is almost paradoxical that the same Euro-modern democratic State that was once the object of postcolonial critique has now become irreplaceable in theorisations of postcolonial citizenship (Chatterjee 2004). In many ways, as Chen and Huang argue in their piece on Taiwanese citizenship regimes in this special issue, the demise of formal colonialism and the advent of democracy in former colonies was no guarantee of the *democratisation* of citizenship regimes as well (Chen and Huang 2026). Acknowledging this, Mamdani (2002) alludes to the need to unmake euro-modern Statehood in order to be able to create citizenship models that are fit for purpose in postcolonial societies. Manby (2023) echoes a similar sentiment, cautioning against treating decolonisation as the temporal marker for the democratisation of citizenship, stressing instead on the need to interrogate the continuities between colonialism and postcolonialism.

In the face of such challenges, anthropological accounts of citizenship are greatly insightful. While anthropology as a discipline suffers from the same epistemic defects as western liberalism (Gough 1968), what is striking about anthropology as a discipline is its attentiveness to power dynamics in the subjects it studies (Wolf 1999). Several anthropologists have pointed to the role of power in constituting national identity and citizenship and enforcing hierarchies between people based on their ethnic, religious, or even class backgrounds (Ghosh 2017; Misra 2011).

To anthropologists, citizenship is not just a formal institution. It is about belonging. At its core, citizenship is an affective connection between an individual and a State, and more importantly, between an individual and others occupying the territory of the State (Ibrahim 2020; Raheja 2018). As Yesmin writes, anthropology has the facility to see behind the documentary bureaucracy of citizenship, the political authority of the State, and discourses of nationhood (Yesmin 2024). Anthropology is able to locate citizenship in the lived experience of the everyday.

This article hopes to address the current fallacies in centring the postcolonial State by drawing on the analytical tools available in anthropology. Excavating a story of the Irulars, a community that is both ethnically and epistemically marginalised in India, through collaborative fieldwork, this piece tries to show how the citizenship status of the Irulars is constructed by their everyday encounters with the State and its agents. Before that, it is important to map how the institution of citizenship has responded to the evolving nature of the Indian State itself. It is to this point that the next section turns.

Changing India, changing citizenship

India is currently undergoing a political transition, shifting from a liberal democracy toward what has been termed an ‘electoral autocracy’ (Nord et al. 2025). While the term remains contested, scholars have sought to identify its defining characteristics. According to Bajpai and Kureshi (2022), India’s democratic decline is marked by two key processes: executive aggrandisement and autocratic legalism. Executive aggrandisement refers to the consolidation of power by the executive through the capture of State institutions, often under the guise of democratic legitimacy. Studies about Orbán’s Hungary and Putin’s Russia illustrate this dynamic, where exclusionary policies targeting minority populations have been justified through populist mandates (Pogonyi 2026; Brancati 2014). In India, a similar pattern has emerged, with the ruling right-wing party extending its control over virtually all State institutions – including the judiciary, police, election commission, and censorship bodies (Fuchs 2024). Autocratic legalism operates as a component of executive aggrandisement and involves the strategic use of law to entrench authoritarian power while preserving the formal appearance of legality (Scheppelle 2018). Intuitively, these features can be found in the current political moment in India, as later parts of this section will show. Whether it is the introduction of a legislative ban on beef (Jakobsen and Nielsen 2023) or the criminalisation of triple talaq (Parveen 2024) or the criminalisation of inter-religious marriages (Sonkar 2022), law has no doubt been an indispensable tool in the sustenance of the authoritarian State. However, India’s engagement with citizenship laws complicates this temporal narrative embedded in authoritarianism. In other words, the popular belief that authoritarianism can be traced to the rise of the right-wing mandate in politics (Singh 2023). However, as Jalal (1995) argues, citizenship laws overtly demonstrate how the authoritarian State has been an incremental project; a project that can be traced back to the colonial administration itself.

The first citizenship law in India was enacted by the colonial regime in 1914. It established two classes of British subjects: natural-born British subjects and those granted certificates of naturalisation by colonial authorities (Sinha 1962). Although the legislation formally adopted the principle of *ius soli*, it simultaneously institutionalised exclusive

forms of citizenship along racial lines by creating differentiated categories. Even within the latter category, colonial subjects were not treated uniformly. A small segment of Indian society – those belonging to privileged castes, where caste refers to a birth-based system of social stratification assigning individuals and communities to hierarchical social positions (Ayyathurai 2014), and those with access to generational wealth – were granted a more expansive form of citizenship. Damodaran (2006) and Shankar (2023) refer to these individuals as ‘brown saviours’: elites who gained enhanced citizenship rights by serving colonial interests, whether through revenue collection or administrative roles.

India’s independence in 1947, albeit hard-fought, proved to be a point of violent rupture, with the partition of the country into Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. As famed historian Guha (2007) writes, India was always an unlikely nation. As a highly populous and diverse country, there was no semblance of a common culture or political allegiance in India, as in the case of western liberal democracies. Prior to the partition, there was already a long-running negotiation about the citizenship status of Muslims in Pakistan (Jalal 2017). Early debates in the constituent assembly on the definition of minority reveal how many drafters of the Constitution were staunchly opposed to segregated citizenship on religious lines. One of the drafters from the Madras Presidency, Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar remarked: ‘we may make a distinction between people who have voluntarily and deliberately chosen another country as their home and those who want to retain their connection with this country. But we cannot on any racial or religious or other grounds make a distinction between one kind of persons and another, or one sect of persons and another sect of persons’ (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949, Vol. IX) Yet, it became impossible to reconcile the very different nation-State aspirations that germinated within the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, two of the leading political outfits which ultimately formed government in Pakistan and India respectively (Ahmed 2022). In some accounts of the partition, the irreconcilable religious differences are attributed to the colonial regime’s persistent policy of exaggerating communal riots and denying a federal-State model (Shodhan 2017). But no one was prepared for the scale of violence that ensued on the night of independence (Khan 2017).¹

Naturally then, citizenship became a matter of even greater priority for the newly independent Indian State. The chief drafter of the constitution, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, clarified that the wounds of the partition ought to make clear that a democratic polity could not be a mere paper promise for Indian citizens (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1949, Vol. XI). A promise of citizenship would only be meaningful if it were accompanied by a commitment by the State to social and economic democracy (Alam and Singh 2024; Drèze 2015). That is why although independent India adopted a mode of singular citizenship (Constitution of India, Part II, 1950), it also introduced affirmative action, colloquially called ‘reservations’. Reservations are a system of special provisions contained in the Indian constitution to reserve seats for those marginalised on the basis of sex and caste in matters of public employment and political representation. Ambedkar, himself a caste-oppressed thinker, was of the view that reservations were a democratic tool to expand the citizenship of the Indian nation-State (Bhaskar 2024). Even if reservations have no bearing on the formal legal label of citizen or not citizen, they facilitate participation in the nation-making project. To that extent, reservations are not merely an instrument to redistribute

State resources, they are also a tool to reconfigure the founding norms of the nation-State and should therefore be studied as a citizenship-building vehicle as well (Fraser 1995).

The use of law as a tool to shape and restrict citizenship began as early as the Partition. In 1949, the Constituent Assembly of India passed the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act (Joyal 2013). The Act put in place a deeply paternalistic arrangement between the newly founded States of India and Pakistan to 'restore' Hindu women to India and Muslim women to Pakistan. As Ashesh and Thiruvengadam (2017) write, the law effectively pinned the communal mandate of nationhood in women's bodies, a political move that was undertaken without the consultation or consent of female citizens of either country. The 1949 Act was only the start of a more insidious strategy of advancing exclusionary ideas of citizenship through the vehicle of law.

In the heels of the 1949 Act, India adopted the 1955 Citizenship Act. The Act, in Section 3, recognised citizenship on four grounds: birth, descent, registration, and naturalisation. Notably, the Act was retrospectively applied to 'every person born in India on or after 26 January 1950 shall be a citizen of India by birth'. In genesis, the law was aligned to a *ius soli* model of citizenship (Sinha 1962). In 1986, the law was amended, mainly to dilute its *ius soli* character and herald a *ius sanguinis* model (Joyal 2016). The amendment was a response to the publication of electoral rolls in the eastern state of Assam which revealed the massive presence of foreigners from Nepal and Bangladesh as registered voters (Rajya Sabha debates, 1986). The Act was promptly amended to restrict citizenship access of those born after 1986, unless they were able to show that strong links to the Indian territory by descent. Effectively, the amendment was intended to make it difficult or illegal for certain migrants – typically Muslim migrants – from acquiring Indian citizenship (Roy 2010). The legal rules on citizenship, once again, were instrumentalized to enforce the authoritarian power of the State.

Since the turn of the century, with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party gaining political clout and ultimately forming government at the central level, the conceptual foundations and material implications of Indian citizenship have come to be aggressively reformulated along ethnoreligious lines (Yesmin 2024).

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 – yet to be fully implemented – represents the culmination of this strategy. Officially justified as a corrective to the exclusions produced by the National Register of Citizens – a State-led initiative to identify legal and illegal residents in Assam – the legislation introduced a fast-track naturalisation pathway for Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Christian, and Buddhist refugees who arrived in India before December 2014 from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Afghanistan – all Muslim-majority countries. The implication was doubly clear this time: 'Muslims do not belong to India in the same way as Hindus do' (Apoorvanand 2024). The denial of citizenship through law, then, was only a confirmation of the delinking of *social ties* of belonging (Prabhat 2018).

As Isin and Turner note, citizenship is not just a status accorded by the State, but also a social act (Isin and Turner 2002) through which belonging is negotiated and renegotiated (Glenn 2011). Such a social conception of citizenship allows one to appreciate that status and recognition norms are made and unmade by a large ecosystem of actors, extending far beyond the machinations of the State. Baxi calls this the 'everyday' of law (Baxi 2019), noting that 'lawmaking, like judicial interpretation, has the jurispathic capacity of destroying the everyday, by potentially destroying forms of relatedness, kinship and/or

friendship.’ In creating such an all-consuming infrastructure, there is no space for minorities to claim or take ownership of their own citizenship. Baxi’s call is particularly poignant and pressing in an authoritarian setting which ‘ideologically fuses the State and non-State together’ (Bhat, Suresh, and Acevedo 2022).

In recent years, this correlation between autocratization and the social disenfranchisement of citizenship of minorities has become increasingly evident. Though the State crime records bureau has ceased disaggregating data on communal violence, citing the ‘unreliability of available data’, independent documentation shows an unprecedented rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes since the BJP came to power. Between 2009 and 2019, 90% of religion-based hate crimes occurred after 2014, with hate speech increasing by nearly 500% from 2014 to 2018 (India Hate Lab, 2024). BJP-ruled states have hosted 80% of hate speech gatherings targeting Muslims, while communal violence has claimed over 10,000 lives since 1950 (India Hate Lab, 2024). From 2015 to 2018 alone, so-called ‘cow protection’ mobs – primarily operating in BJP-governed states – were responsible for at least 44 deaths and 280 injuries (Quint, Uncovering Hate lab). India now leads the world in State-enforced internet shutdowns, typically invoked to silence media reportage about the public response to the unilateral and discriminatory legal changes introduced in minority-heavy areas such as Kashmir or the northeastern state of Manipur (Internet Shut Down tracker). Unlike the citizenship changes or the beef bans or laws prohibiting interfaith marriages, this is not violence enacted through the device of law. But it has the same effect of diminishing the experience of citizenship.

However, as previously argued, the predominant focus on communal polarisation of citizenship has coincided with a neglect of intragroup citizenship segregation, particularly against caste-disadvantaged citizens, especially that which takes place outside the formal lawmaking spaces. The travails of the Irular community – as outlined in the next section – invite attention to the ways in which the autocratic State’s strategy of combining law and social exclusion of citizenship extends far beyond the universe of religious minorities.

Irulars as less-than Indian citizens

The Irulars are a seasonally nomadic tribal community who live in and move across the south Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. A 200,000-strong community, historically, the Irulars were a purely nomadic hunter-gatherer community whose traditional vocation was snake and rat catching (Sastri 1976). The lifestyles, livelihoods, and worldviews of Irulars were intimately tied to nature and their common lands. In 1871, Irulars were among the first tribes to be targeted by the notorious Criminal Tribes Act, a colonial legislation that criminalised the lifestyles and subsistence practices of non-sedentary communities (Rana 2011). The colonial administration insidiously invoked the caste system to justify the targeting of nomadic communities (Ambedkar 2014).² Drafting records of the Act reflect the ease with which colonial authorities pathologized nomadic peoples as ‘hereditary criminals who pursued their forefather’s profession’ (D’Souza 2001). The Irulars, together with all the other tribes who were put on the blacklist, were forced into peasant labour (Raman 1991). The majority of Irulars then completely resigned themselves to a life of bonded labour in brick kilns and rice mills (Revathi 2019).

When the new Constitution was being debated, nomadic communities such as the Irulars organised aggressively to seek constitutional subjectivity by rallying under ‘minority’ status. Indeed, in early debates, the term ‘minority’ was understood to encompass three kinds of communities: religious minorities, backward classes, and tribals; an understanding, as Bajpai (2000) notes, that emerged out of the differential governance frameworks installed by the British colonial regime. For tribal communities, minorityhood did not fully capture their special relationship with land or their cultural superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the Indian population. Nonetheless, they were willing to embrace minority status as a political concession, primarily to find remedies for their socio-economic and political disenfranchisement (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1946, vol. I).³ Although the dominant nationalist opinion at the time was apprehensive about a liberal recognition of minority status, fearing separatism, there was still resident sympathy towards the claims for political representation made by minorities and an assurance made towards realising these claims in the constitutional framework (Judge 2022). However, the violent partition of India in 1947 etched the strains of religious discord so firmly that it led to a drastic scaling down of the minority problem in further deliberations of the Constitution. As a result of this scaling down, the Constitution disqualified backward classes and tribals from minority status (Castellino and Redondo 2006). These communities were instead recognised as disadvantaged *Hindus*. Minority status was solely offered to religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. This was only the first of many occasions on which constitutional law failed nomadic communities such as the Irulars.

In 1952, after India gained independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed (Renke 2008). 200 previously blacklisted communities were de-notified. The Irulars were one such community. Shortly after, Irulars living in the state of Tamil Nadu came to be constitutionally recognised as a ‘Scheduled Tribe’ under the Constitution of India, based on their ‘socio-economic backwardness, their geographical isolation, and their historical experience of marginalization.’ This constitutional recognition made them eligible for subsidies in food provisions, affirmative action benefits in higher education and public employment. In the state of Tamil Nadu, the Irulars are now one of six communities protected as a ‘particularly vulnerable tribal group’ and constitute 25% of the Scheduled Tribes population in the state.

However, beneath the veneer of constitutional promises, the reality is that de-notified communities such as the Irulars continued to experience precarious citizenship in post-colonial India as well. This time, again, their subordination was *secured by law*. The same year that India repealed the Criminal Tribes Act, the parliament passed the Habitual Offenders Act 1952, which retained the same dehumanising rhetoric and surveilling regime as the Criminal Tribes Act. The 1952 Habitual Offenders Act recommended that communities practicing non-sedentary lifestyles be moved to ‘corrective settlements’, where they would be required to report their movements to the police (Bhattacharyya 2022). Those found outside the settlements can be arrested both by the police and by village chiefs (Sonavane 2023). The institutionalised discrimination of the legislation prompted several nomadic communities to refer to themselves as ‘ex-criminal tribes’ (Bokil and Raghavan 2016). By this time, reports of violence against nomadic communities were rampant.

On paper, the Irulars have always remained Indian citizens; they were never stripped of the formal legal status of citizenship. Yet, they were excluded from meaningful

membership in the Indian State through the systematic denial of social rights and recognition – core components of substantive citizenship, as I discovered during five months of collaborative fieldwork with over 800 Irular families living in the districts of Villupuram and Cuddalore.

Particularly for the Irulars and hunter-gatherer nomadic communities like them, the first two decades after India's independence saw the passing of a slew of legislations that effectively denying them practicing their citizenship in the way they desired. In 1972, the Wildlife Protection Act criminalised the Irulars' subsistence activities of snake-catching and rat-catching, forcing them to find alternate livelihoods (Warrier 1992). My Irular collaborators revealed how their diminished citizenship is enforced both through formal legal mechanisms and through the social life of the law. Indeed, studies have found that in enforcing the legislation, the forest police indiscriminately arrest nomadic people, often without any formally registered complaint (Criminal Justice and Police Accountability Project, 2023).⁴ The Wildlife Protection Act was followed by the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, which placed the central government – rather than local councils – in charge of approving forest land use for non-forest purposes (Ramani 2023). With this change, it became easier for development projects to receive approval, with very little room left for consultation with affected marginalised communities such as the Irulars. On some occasions, the Irulars would even be charged for violating the Forest Conservation Act merely for continuing to access forests to prepare their traditional medicine (Field interview, Vannipayir, 2023).

The phenomenon of false complaints against Irulars has only intensified in the present day, as caste fault lines have been drawn more visibly. Studies suggest that each year, almost 700 false cases are filed against Irulars (Article 51-A 2021). Prof. Prabha Kalyani from the Irular Sangam, a civil society that offers legal aid to the Irulars in northern Tamil Nadu, expressing alarm at the rising trend of fake complaints against Irulars, remarked: 'None of the arrested Irulars have a history of criminal cases. On the contrary, there is solid evidence of their presence at the brick kiln during their alleged crimes. Even with so much proof of their innocence, if the police arrest them, it is only because they consider Irulars to be socially vulnerable and therefore easy targets' (Field interview, Gingee, 2022).

False complaints are only one component of the discriminatory citizenship ecosystem Irulars grapple with. Land is another area where the law has been employed to police the Irulars. In 2006, the central government adopted the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, recognising tribal and forest-dwelling communities as owners of forest land (Joseph 2022). As a Scheduled Tribe, Irulars across the Villupuram and Cuddalore districts felt hope when the legislation was passed, particularly those who lived close to or in forested areas (Field interview, Veeranamur, 2022). A study by Lee and Wolf (2018) examined the rate of issuance of land titles to Irulars under the legislation only to shockingly find that the regional courts of Tamil Nadu had banned local councils from granting titles to Irulars. It was in 2016 – ten years following the passing of the legislation – that this ban was removed. Today, Tamil Nadu is one of the country's worst performers in implementing the 2006 law. Until October 2021, out of the 1194 individual applications received at the village level, only 71 were issued titles – a rejection rate of 94% (Joseph 2022). The Sangam's reports suggest that the rejection rate of Irular claims may be as high as

70%, a marginal improvement from the state average but still an overall dismal figure (Field interview, Thindivanam, 2022). Amongst all the districts within the state, in Cuddalore and Villupuram districts – given the proactive contributions of civil society organisations – the success rate of title awards is marginally better. As the Irulars grapple with landlessness, structural discrimination, and social stigma, they are clear that the law is their worst culprit. Reflecting on the relationship Irulars share with law, a young Irular girl from the Veeranamur village remarked:

‘Those who label us an uneducated community will be shocked to learn how much we know about the law. Every time someone from the village is rounded up by the police and put in custody, we have to rush to the Sangam to understand how to secure bail. After these repeated visits, young people like me have become experts in writing applications. I know that the police often cite wildlife laws and caste laws to book Irulars, on the rare occasions that they bother explaining. The irony is that I was never interested in the law. I am studying medicine, but now I feel maybe I could even study law’ (Interview, 2022).

It is no surprise that many Irulars expressed feelings of being ‘neglected’ and ‘abandoned’ by the Indian State, despite being its legal citizens (Field interview, Mailam, 2022). One Irular collaborator confided that she often felt like an ‘outsider’ in her own country (Field interview, Mayiladumpara, 2022). An Irular activist – Rajesh Dheena – remarked to me that ‘although the Constitution of India promises all citizens a life of dignity, Irulars are left behind’ (Field interview, Thindivanam, 2022). The condition of the Irulars can be described as ‘a form of quasi-statelessness, in which citizens are formally included but substantively excluded’ (Jaya 2015).

Uncovering the web of authoritarian citizens

The experience of citizenship by the Irulars clearly indicts agents beyond the State. Vortherms (2024) finds this infrastructure of collusion to exclude particularly unique to authoritarian contexts. Contemporary authoritarian States sustain themselves only because many non-State agents enforce new and sometimes even more particularistic hierarchies within the population (Goodman 2026; Chidambaram 2021). Vortherms’ theory is analytically useful for two reasons. Firstly, because it reveals the underlying assumption that citizenship is a social and political practice (Džankić, Knott, and Pogonyi 2026; Bauböck 2008). It is not just a formal paper document validating one’s connections to a nation-State. Citizenship instead resides in the everyday experience of feeling like one belongs in a nation-State: whether it is being able to vote or practice a livelihood of one’s choice or articulate political critique. Secondly, and relatedly, Vortherms’ framework busts the myth that authoritarianism is exclusively a strategy of centralisation. This understanding is not new to political science conceptions of the State. The State is no longer accepted as a unitary, homogenous entity (Sack 1986). Many scholars accept that the nation-State is in fact a patchwork of grammars, people, and institutions ‘stitched and held together through various assemblage practices’, in which the non-State contributes significantly (Allen and Cochrane 2010). Vortherms clarifies how patchwork of authority remains true also in authoritarian States, perhaps even counterintuitively. The reality is that authoritarian States actively decentralise in order to allow certain members of the population to benefit from State resources more actively in exchange of their loyalty to the politics of the State (Sud 2022).

The decentralised nature of some authoritarian regimes means that those who are selected as members of the regime are given the ‘entitlement’ to mould, perform, and challenge citizenship (Chen and Xu 2017; Distelhorst and Fu 2019), as against the de-citizensation of others.

Indeed, the current quasi-statelessness of the Irulars demonstrates who are the various authoritarian citizens who secure such an infrastructure of citizenship marginalisation (Distelhorst and Fu 2019). This paper focuses on a non-exclusive list of three authoritarian citizens: government-appointed scientific experts, the local civil society, and caste-privileged ordinary citizens.

The first amongst this group are scientific experts selected by the State. In order to claim the benefits of Indian citizenship, whether it is being able to vote or obtain food subsidies, Irulars typically need to be in possession of identity documents. These identity documents are colloquially known as ‘community certificates’ (Field interview, Karimpuli, 2022). The community certificate is necessary for Irular students to enrol in schools and universities, for Irular families to obtain rations (government-subsidised food supplies) every month (Omjasvin 2021), and even to vote in elections. This is not a requirement imposed in law, but a requirement that emerges out of practice. My Irular collaborators shared in great detail how harrowing and humiliating they found the process of obtaining the community certificate (Field interviews MGR Nagar (2022), Olakkur (2022), Munnoor, (2022)). To ascertain if the Irulars genuinely belong to the Irular community in order to process their community certificate applications, government-appointed anthropology experts typically ask the Irulars to perform their customary dance and music (Field interview, Pazhamundi, 2022). These experts pass denigratory comments about their skin colour, peculiar speech, and the nature of their hair, often denying certificates who – in their opinion – have seemingly escaped the primitive phrenological characterisations of the community. An Irular woman from the Karimpuli village lamented: ‘You will not believe how we must struggle for our community certificates. One government officer usually orders us to prove we are Irular. He questions us rudely about why we don’t have matted hair, why we don’t speak in the same dialect as before, and why we don’t wear the same clothes as before. The officer orders us to sing and dance to prove we are Irulars. Every word they utter is meant to tell us that we are not worth recognising. I accept the procedure only so that my grandchildren don’t have to struggle in the same way’ (Field interview, Karimpuli, 2022).

But unlike her, many younger Irulars flatly deny consenting to these procedures. This explains why amongst the 32 villages I visited during fieldwork, only in four villages did residents have community certificates (Field interview, Prof. Kalyani, 2022). Almost 50% of Irulars do not have community certificates. 70% of the Irulars living in Tamil Nadu haven’t been able to vote in independent India even once. Young Irulars are often denied entry in schools and universities because they are unable to furnish community certificates.

From my interviews (Field interview, Karimpuli, 2022), I learnt that Edgar Thurston’s work is still used to train civil servants responsible for issuing community certificates. Edgar Thurston was a British museologist who authored a seven-volume encyclopaedia, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Published in 1909, his book offers a comprehensive ethnographic survey of ‘social groups in the Madras Presidency and the princely states of Travancore, Mysore, Coorg and Pudukkottai’ (Reddy, Reddy, and Naik 2023). Even a

cursor reading of Thurston's work prompts questions about its antiquation. Although Thurston's peers in the west were quick to valorise his work, over the 100 years following its publication, the colonial and casteist rhetorics of Thurston's work have generated much controversy. Several anthropologists have criticised his survey for reifying 'scientific racism' and treating natives as *mere artefacts* incapable of producing knowledge (Prakash 1992). Yet, Thurston's work continues to be the primary guiding document for government experts tasked to determine whether Irular applicants do in fact belong to the Irular community or not. That government experts are trained using such antiquated documents is not surprising since the authoritarian Indian State is strongly committed to ensuring that nomadic communities and tribal communities like the Irulars remain in the fringes of State-making (Akta 2009). However, what it demonstrates is how government experts contribute significantly to policing the citizenship experience of Irulars by continuing the mantle of the authoritarian project.

The unquestioning acceptance of tribal identity as a precondition to citizenship points to the second actor within the network of authoritarian citizens who contribute to the continuation of authoritarianism: the local civil society.

NGOs, albeit presented as emancipatory, divert attention away from those who are most marginalised within the community. One of the most pressing complaints of Irulars is the systematic denial of their land title applications (Field interview, Mailam, 2022). Land is central for Irulars to belong to the Indian State. Till date, the de-citizenisation of Irulars was premised on their nomadic lifestyle; they could not belong to a political community because they did not stay long enough to belong to any community (Field interview, Killai, 2022; Bhukya and Surepally 2021). Given their semi-nomadic lifestyle, Irulars are rarely registered as regular residents of any municipality since 'they were not seen as fulfilling the criterion of "effective occupation" of the land' (Minj 2023). Many Irulars settled into sedentary lifestyles and have taken to working as daily wage labourers in plastic factories and brick kilns simply in order to be recognised as residents. Yet, when they apply for land titles citing proof of work and residence, their title claims are systematically rejected by land assessors (Field interview, Munnoor, 2022). Reports suggest that the rejection rate of Irular claims may be as high as 70%, a marginal improvement from the state average but still an overall dismal figure (Srinivasan 2021). One wonders why civil society could not bring the Irulars' struggles for land title and residence documents to the attention of higher authorities. Surprisingly, it is only Irulars living in the plains who struggle to obtain land titles (Field interview with Irular activist Maari, Umayalpuram, 2023). Their counterparts in the hilly areas have been landed for long.

NGOs have played a central role in reinforcing disparities between plains-based and hills-based Irulars. Historically, tribal communities lived in the hills, while privileged caste Hindus settled in the plains. Both had wealth, but colonial ties gave upper-caste Hindus greater influence. Unable to access tribal resources, the colonial State incentivized upper-caste migration into the hills, using new laws to dispossess tribal communities and exploit hilly regions (Field interview, Umayalpuram, 2023). By independence, much of eastern India had been emptied of its tribal populations, who were pushed deeper into forests (Hislop 1866).

In areas like the south where the Irulars were based, however, this strategy met with limited success. Many hills-based Irulars retained land, cattle, and jewellery, and did not face the same economic precarity as their plains-based counterparts (Field interview,

Thindivanam, 2023). Still, civil society actors ignore this distinction, aligning with the State's narrative that frames hill-dwelling tribals as the most affected. As Sokhi-Bulley (2016) writes, civil society actors effectively follow the State's logic of identifying whom to help and whom not to help. Being seen as 'doing' human rights is seemingly more important to such organisations than working for the emancipation of the communities they serve. In his work, Shankar (2023) also notes how postcolonial civil society actors have lately joined forces with the State to convince the public that the real purpose of the decolonial liberation project is to rescue the 'uncontaminated and romanticised subaltern' from western impositions like 'secularism or liberal democracy'. In doing so, brown saviours 'make their privileged positions of caste, class, immigration, and race – which would situate them in a position of not only oppression but also privilege – much harder to interrogate' (Huju 2024). This kind of nativist politics, he argues, reifies authoritarianism under the garb of it serving the help economy.

This allows us to turn to the third clinching piece in the authoritarian citizens' network: privileged caste communities. In any nation-State, participation – through voting or having the chance to contest elections – is a crucial way to assert one's citizenship (Dobler 2019). The fact that tribal populations in India have historically shown the highest voter turnouts in national and local elections is confirmation of the desire of such communities to have a say in agenda-setting (Mehta 2024). Despite the participatory interest of tribal communities and the constitutional protection of reservations, tribal representation remains poor in the Indian Parliament (Sharma 2021), local municipalities (Field interview, MGR Nagar, 2022; Annamalai 1999), and several other sites of governance (Kumar 2023).⁵ This only goes to show that it is not the lack of interest of tribal communities but the absence of a participatory infrastructure that explains the poor representation of tribal communities in decision-making spaces. The key chasm here seems to be that of caste, an odious system of social segregation that pervades most parts of public and private life in South Asian societies. As a community affixed to a lower rung of the caste hierarchy, the Irulars have long struggled to occupy public space and claim citizenship because of the persistent ostracisation they face on the basis of their caste.

Despite knowing well that Irulars are eligible for political reservations, the communities who live bordering Irular villages – often communities privileged by caste – create many roadblocks that prevent Irulars from availing of the political benefits due to them as a Scheduled Tribe and ultimately extinguish the possibility of their participation in agenda-setting. My Irular collaborators attested to how more socially powerful caste-based communities openly rig elections in Irular villages or instigate fights amongst Irulars, to ensure that an Irular candidate is not voted to power at the local council (Field interview, Thindivanam, 2022). A young girl who was looking to contest elections spoke about how villagers living in nearby villages – those belonging to more privileged castes – threatened her and her family members with violence unless she revoked her candidature (Field interview, Thalapathy Nagar, 2022). In some villages I visited, Irulars had in fact been elected to local municipality posts. However, I learnt that even in these rare cases of Irulars getting elected, the win was made possible by privileged caste members of the local councils for whom Irular presence merely had tokenistic value (Field interview, Thalapathy Nagar, 2022). Young and inexperienced Irulars would be voted to power mainly so that they would not pose any challenge to the agendas of privileged caste representatives.

Besides directly infringing on the Irulars' exercise of the political rights accruing out of citizenship, privileged caste communities also collude to make Irulars feel like they do not belong to the Indian society. Many of my interlocutors attested to being discriminated on the basis of their colour and caste. Although nomadic lifestyles had been criminalised as a result of which Irulars could no longer practice their traditional livelihoods of snake-catching and rat-catching, many neighbouring villages would force Irulars to hunt snakes for them on the promise of high pay, only to later report Irulars to the police (Field interview, Jakkampettai, 2022). One of my interlocutors, a sociologist by profession, Saktivel recounted that: 'Today, as Irulars have been forcibly settled into daily wage work and now live in close proximity to caste-privileged communities, no one will think twice before pinning the crime onto a young Irular. At the time of the passing of the colonial Criminal Tribes Act, the narrative of Irulars being hereditary thieves was constructed out of thin air. At best, Irulars would pluck an ash gourd from someone's farm because they had not tasted it before. The same authoritarian mentality has trickled down to the majoritarian community of today's India. It is from this upper caste community that the government draws strength' (Field interview, Veeranamur, 2022). Some of my Irular interlocutors also reported to cases of land grabbing and unfounded evictions by neighbouring communities. In the Cuddalore district, many Irulars who engage in worm-hunting started migrating to new areas, such as the Palk Bay region, after the 2004 tsunami that struck south India because the worm counts in their lagoon had decreased significantly (Sivramkrishna 2021). Their migratory lifestyle pitted them against local farmers in the Palk Bay region who accused the Irulars of damaging the marine environment of the Palk Bay and ultimately denied permission to the Irulars to harvest in the lagoon even temporarily (Field interview, Pichavaram, 2022; Killai, 2022). These constant, losing tussles with privileged caste communities have convinced many Irulars that a meaningful experience of citizenship in today's India may even be 'impossible' for them (Field interview, Veeranamur, 2025).

Conclusion

With the global rise of 'fortress Europe' models of overt restrictions on migration and citizenship, much scholarly attention has been devoted to the question of exclusion. However, there has been comparatively less focus on how nation-states actively instrumentalize *inclusion* – not merely to integrate, but to regulate. As Hacki observes, tropes like the 'model minority' or the 'good immigrant' are no longer confined to Western liberal democracies; they are commonly invoked also by postcolonial States as a method to police who acquires membership of the nation-State (Koch 2018). These rhetorics reveal how more than exclusion, nation-States are invested in policing inclusion (Ganohariti 2026). They do so by constructing a hard-baked discourse of alterity or difference that makes it impossible for certain groups to ever feel like they belong.

In authoritarian India, Muslims have become the primary targets of an ongoing campaign of citizenship exclusion. Yet, the case of the Irulars illuminates a parallel, less visible process: the historical negotiation of inclusion faced by caste – and ethnicity-based minorities who are citizens in law but not in practice. Their story reveals that the apparatus of

conditional inclusion is no longer monopolised by the State – it is jointly produced through a broader assemblage of actors. As Chen and Xu (2017) argue, authoritarian states often justify centralised control by selectively devolving power to an elite circle of non-state agents. This strategic decentralisation, or at least its performance, is integral to sustaining authoritarian legitimacy. It enables the diffusion of state ideologies of belonging, while shielding the State from direct accountability.

What emerges in the case of the Irulars is precisely such a collaborative infrastructure. As this article shows, a network of authoritarian citizens – from civil society and scientific experts to ordinary, more privileged citizens and the media – come together to uphold the State's devices of 'less-than', 'good', and 'bad' citizens. While these agents are no doubt engaged in such collaborations because it affords them more power, the truth is that in doing so, they also break historical conceptions of citizenship being a purely Statist preserve. The involvement of authoritarian citizens in making and unmaking citizenship fortifies the reality that contemporary citizenship is a social practice and not merely a formal legality; citizenship is socially practiced, affectively experienced, and collectively enforced. Understanding this dispersed authorship of citizenship is crucial – not only for diagnosing the authoritarian turn in India, but for reimagining more equitable and inclusive frameworks of political belonging.

Notes

1. The opening line of Yasmin Khan's book *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (Yale University Press, 1997) is striking: 'South Asians learned that the British Indian empire would be partitioned on 3 June 1947 (a mere two months before Independence!). They heard about it on the radio, from relations and friends, by reading newspaper and, later, through government pamphlets.' And another: 'perhaps hundreds of thousands, didn't hear the news for many weeks.'
2. Caste is a birth-based mode of socio-economic segregation invoked to police occupations, marriages, eating practices, access to natural resources, and even access to knowledge production. Caste is a highly odious system that one purportedly enters upon birth. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (Verso Books, 2014).
3. In one of his speeches at the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh Munda, the leading representative of tribal populations, declared: 'I do not consider my people a minority the depressed classes also consider themselves "adibasis", the original inhabitants of this country. If you go on adding people like the exterior castes and others who are socially in no man's land, we are not a minority. In any case, we have prescriptive rights that no one dare deny.' 'Constituent Assembly Debates', Vol. I, 19 December 1946, paragraph 1.9.66.
4. Studies in central India have found that a high percentage of forest crimes are pinned on Scheduled Tribes although Scheduled Tribes make up a very small percentage of the population. Criminal Justice and Police Accountability Project, 'Wildlife Policing: The Reign of Criminalisation in the Forests of Madhya Pradesh' (2023).
5. From 2018–2022, STs comprised 3.8% of the 4500 selections made to the Indian Administrative Services, the Indian Police Services, and the forest services. Mahesh Kumar, 'OBC, SC/ST Communities Under-Represented in Civil Services', *NewsClick*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.newsclick.in/obc-scst-communities-under-represented-civil-services>.

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