From being reptile catchers, Irulas of Chengalpattu, near Chennai, are aspiring to climb up the rungs of education and skills.

At 65, Vedan still puts to use his skill to catch cobras and vipers. The traditional vocation has helped Irula tribesmen like him from a hamlet in Chengalpattu, near Chennai, transition from the life of a hunter gatherer to that of a consumer. He hands over the reptiles he catches to the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society, which helps him support his family, which includes seven children.

The Chengalpattu settlement resembles a traditional hamlet full of thatched huts with hammocks and at least a pair of dogs. The latter two are markers of an arboreal and hunting life: the hammock helps to stay put in the safety of tall trees and the dogs to chase game. "But most of the children now go to school, and aspire to join the mainstream in their own right," Vedan says. But for the paucity of money and other resources, the hamlet offers a good setting for a child to grow up, in the tightly-knit community.

During the Maasi Magham festival of the tribe on the shore at Mahabalipuram during February-March, Irulas from hamlets across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala join in the celebrations and worship Goddess Kanniyamman. Many sernior tribespeople feel the community is losing its fables and traditional songs and practices. Even their language is under threat with youngsters mostly speaking Tamil, Kannada or Malayalam. Some of them say the community was known for treating snakebite victims, but that skills is now lost. However, the venom extracted from the snakes they catch helps in producing antivenom. It's a vocation that helps at least some of them continue a tenuous connection witha lifestyle that is fast ebbing away.

Romulus Whitaker and other conservationists established the snake catchers' cooperative society in 1978. The Irula skills for finding and catching snakes is widely admired, but in the past, the tribe used to catch snakes just for the skin. Now, the skill is put to use for a life-saving service.