



Ethnohistory, Ethnography And Cultural Aspects Of The Chenchu Tribe Of Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

India has always been described as a “melting pot” of races and culture. Tribal in India is the most glaring example exploitation indifference and lack of appreciation for our divergent minority groups. The present study is an attempt to study the ethnohistoric and historiographic literature available on various aspects of culture and society of Chenchu tribe of Andhra Pradesh in India.

Among the thirty three tribes in Andhra Pradesh the most populous one is Sugali it numbers 2 lakhs. Next to Sugali are the Yanadis and Koyas who count 2 lakhs each. On other hand the Gond and the Yerukala have a population of more than one lakh each, while the Konda Dora and the Savara have little less than one lakh each. Only two tribes namely the Bagathy and Jatapu have a population between fifty thousand and sixty thousand each. The Chenchu, Gadava, Kolam Kammara, Konda Kapu, Konda reddy, Khond and Valmiki number between 20 thousands or thirty thousands. The Kotiya, Manne dora, Muka dora, Pradhan and Andh, Konda Reddi, Mali, Nayak and Reddi dora have a population less than three thousands each and the other six tribes namely Bhil, Kattunagakan, Kulia, Rana and Thoti have a population of less than one thousand each.

Keeping this objective in view, the present study focuses its attention on the ethnohistory and the social-cultural mobility of Chenchu tribe in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The fragmented accounts of ethnohistory of the tribals provided by anthropologists and historians in the past one hundred years do not clearly deal with several issues especially the historical affinity of the Chenchus, the multiplicity of designations for a single tribe in different places. The contributions of the tribes and non-tribals to the cultural dynamics operating in the dominant tribal population as a step in the long process of social cultural homogenization within the context of the state of Andhra Pradesh.

1.Introduction

Chenchu is one of the hunting and gathering tribes in India. Considering the stage of the development, Government of India has declared 'Chenchu' as one of the primitive tribes out of the 73 tribes declared as primitive in India. All the tribes declared as primitive require special development effort over and above the development programmes earmarked for the tribes. Virtually, no historical written material is available on the Chenchus. May be Chenchu is such a small tribe it did not attract the attention of any historian. However, it did get the attention of the British Officers of India and also of a famous British Anthropologist, Prof. Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf during the British period. After India's Independence a few anthropologists from S.V. University, Tirupati and Tribal Cultural Research Institute, Government of Andhra Pradesh did write on Chenchus, but most of them wrote both on ethnography and culture change. Even those who wrote during the British Period mainly dealt with ethnographic aspects of the tribe. Two important studies in 1960s, one on a Chenchu village and another a small ethnographic study were undertaken by Directorate of Census, Andhra Pradesh. However, it would be appropriate to state that large part of data collected in the field work is used in writing this report on Chenchus. Wherever necessary it has been presented in historical perspective, quoting sources, pre-British and post-British.

1.2.Distribution

Chenchu is a small tribe population wise now numbering around 25,000 inhabiting the Eastern Ghats or of Atmakur and Dornal and Amarabad Plateau of Kurnool and Mahaboobnagar Districts respectively (this part of Eastern Ghats is called Nallamalai forests). A small number of Chenchu families is also found in Markapur and Giddalur Regions of Nallamalai forest in the Prakasam district. Further, a few families of Chenchus live in a few non-tribal villages in Macherla area of Guntur District. These Chenchus called 'Vura Chenchu' (village Chenchus) have no relationship today with the Chenchus of 'Nallamala's'. Neither the 'Vura Chenchus' nor any one knows when they migrated and settled down in non-tribal villages in Guntur District.

1.3.Environment

Haimendorf called "a typical refuge area of a tribe of primitive hunters and collectors of the Nallamalai forest habitat of Chenchus"¹. Varies according to height and soil but is generally of one open deciduous type and in places even assumes a part like character.

Only narrow valleys are found with luxurious and dense forests, with ever green trees and shrubs. Suffice it to say that Nallamalai harbours many species of flora and fauna on which the Chenchu survived for centuries without any difficulty. As long as the Chenchus were the only inhabitants of this forest range, the environment of the forest did not suffer. The moment non-tribal men began intruding and forest operations began the ecology and environment took a heavy toll and the impact on Chenchu life was clearly perceptible.

1.4.Name, Origin and History

Very little is known about the history of Chenchus and about their origin and how the name was derived. Manusmrithi² makes a mention of, a people called 'Chunchu' and was assumed that the 'Chunchu' was nothing but a reference to the present day Chenchus. However, there seems to be confusion with the name 'Chenchu' and its identity. The Chenchu was equated with the 'Irulas' of Tamilnadu, treated as sub-tribe of Yanadi³ etc. Aiyappan writing about Chenchus in 1948 says that "the name 'Chenchu' may be derived from Chunchu meaning, forelocks. The name may also be a corruption of 'Chanchu' which is a suffix meaning 'renowned' or 'celebrated' or skilled as the 'Akshara Chenchu' or 'Chara Chenchu' from the strategic place their home lands occupy, the Chenchus may well have been Charas (spies) of the old kings of the south whose one pre-occupation was the protection of Krishna and Tungabadra frontiers"⁴. This is only an assumption not based on any historical evidence. Nothing in the past or present life or Chenchus suggests that they ever served as 'Charas' (spies) to the kings of south. Another derivation of the name is that these people eat a kind of rat called 'Chunchu' so they are called Chenchus⁵.

There is a folk story popular among the Chenchus of Amarabad Plateau about their origin and their relationship with Lord Mallikarjuna of Srisailam temple. The tale goes like this. Once, a man and his wife lived in a small hut at some distance from temple of Srisailam. They had no children and worshipped Lord Mallikarjuna for children. The God granted them the wish with the condition that the girl born to them should be dedicated to him. After nine months the wife gave birth to a girl child and dedicated her to Lord Mallikarjuna. The girl at the age of three left her parents and began living under a chettu (tree). Because, she lived under a chettu, she was called 'Chenchita'. She grew up into a beautiful damsel. One day Lord Mallikarjuna came across this damsel in the forest and both of them fell in love and got married. The children to this couple are

called Chenchus. Hence descendants of a girl who lived under 'chettu' are called the Chenchus, the present Chenchus⁶. During the field work among the Chenchus of Byrlutigudem of Atmakur Taluk, Kurnool District, the Chenchus claimed that Chenchita who married Lord Narasimha of Ahobilom (located in Nottamalais of Arlagadda Taluk of Kurnool District) was a sister of Chenchu man who was a chief long long ago. Many variations of this folk tale are found among the Chenchus, differing even from one Chenchu settlement to the other making it difficult to point at the original folk tale.

1.5. Language

The Chenchus speak indigenous form of Telugu dialect. However, Haimendorf believes that the language spoken (Telugu) by the Chenchus is not their original dialect because some of the words they use do not belong to Telugu language but to their original language, which they have forgotten⁷.

1.6. Dress

More than a century back, the Kurnool District Mandal had the following to say about the dress of Chenchus. "The men are nearly in a state of nudity, having only a piece of cloth round their loins. The women dress more decently than men, in the style of the wandering basket makers and resemble in features more than the neighbours, the Telugu people of the plains"⁸. E.Thurston has the following to say about their dress. "Some Chenchus bear on the head a cap made of wax, cloth, deer or hare skin. By the more fashionable the tufted ear or bushy tail end of the large Indian squirrel (*Sciurees Indicus*) is attached by way of ornament to the string with which the hair of head is tied in to a bunch behind. Leafy garments have been replaced by white loin cloths and some of the women have adopted the 'ravike' (bodie in imitation of the female costume in the plains)⁹. At present, the Chenchu men do wear shirts made of cheap and coloured cloth stitched by the tailors in the neighbouring plains villages and a 'dholi' and their women wear saree and blouse. One can still come across here and there elderly Chenchu men still using the loin cloth. The Chenchu boys today use shirts and shorts while the girls use frocks.

1.7. Ornaments

Traditional ornaments among Chenchus are very few. While the men use rings made of brass on their fingers the women use a few chains made of coloured beads round their

necks. Today, Chenchus does not mind using gold and silver ornaments being used by the caste neighbours, these consists of a variety of them like, bangles, toe rings and marriage locket, finger rings etc but they cannot afford.

1.8. Family

Family is the basic and most important socio-economic unit among the Chenchus. Nuclear families are predominant with husband, wife and their unmarried children. It is not only true in the past but also at present. Either vertical or horizontal joint families are almost nil but some times a Chenchu family (household may have) one or two relatives. During my field work, I did not come across even one joint family among the Chenchus. Haimendorf¹⁰ observes that families among the Chenchus are economically independent and at the same time cautions that too much of stress on this aspect should not be emphasized because 'there are times in the life of practically every family when without the assistance of outsiders its very existence would be endangered. Immediately after marriage a Chenchu man establishes a separate family. In a few cases a man may migrate to his wife's parents' guidance but starts a separate household.

2. Life Cycle Ceremonies

2.1. Birth

The Chenchus welcome both boys and girls and birth of a child they believe is a blessing from God. For them nausea and stoppage of monthly menstruation are indications of pregnancy. There is no hard and fast rule, where the delivery should take place, at the husband's house or at the wife's parents' place, it all goes according to the convenience of the families. They have an interesting notion that male child is delivered after 9 months while a female child is delivered after 10 months. Haimendorf¹¹ says that the Chenchus are vague about the duration of the pregnancy. A pregnant woman works till the time of delivery. It is also not uncommon a Chenchu woman giving birth in the forest while she is gathering food. A Chenchu midwife attends to the delivery. Immediately after birth, the umbilical cord is cut and along with placenta is thrown into a hole made by a 'bandicoot' and the child is given birth at the same spot. The mother is given a decoction made with 'Vepa Chekka', garlic 'Neelavemu' and pepper. This decoction is given in the morning for about 8 days. Chenchus do not observe pollution. Today a few

Chenchu families do avail the services of hospitals located at a number of places in their area. For a long time they ignored these facilities.

An old Chenchu woman of in Amarabad told that they traditionally practised abortion and contraception by making use of various herbs and green leaves available in the forest. But she refused to give the names of the herbs green leaves being used by them; the same resistance was encountered in the other gudems also. The women said that it was a secret and if they revealed it, they would be punished by the God.

2.2.Name Giving

Sometimes a child is named even before the delivery. This happens with a childless couple after making a vow to the God (seeking the conception). Even a decade age a child is given name only five years after its birth. Till then the girl is called 'Mugemma' and the boy is called 'Mugenna'. Even if the child is named they have no ceremony, parents start addressing the child with the name they have decided. Today a few Chenchu families do name the child on 4th or 5th day following the tradition of non-tribal people.

2.3.Tonsure Ceremony

When the child attains the age of 4 or 5 years it is taken to the shrine of one of their deities like Lingamaiah, Guruvaiah, Bayyanna etc. The maternal uncle of the child performs the tonsure. For boys all the hair is removed on the head while it is only a few locks for the girls. The maternal uncle is presented with new cloths by the parents of the child he in turn presents a saree to his sister.

2.4.Puberty

A girl during her first menarche is made to sit in a corner, cleared and smeared with cow dung. An arrow with a lime stuck on the arrow head is given to the girl and the arrow is smeared with turmeric. Though no pollution is observed, the girl cannot go out because the girl under menstruation is vulnerable to be attacked by evil spirits. In the same evening itself she is given bath and made to wear a new saree.

2.5.Marriage

Two types of acquiring mates are practised, one is called 'Pelli' (marriage) and the other is called 'Raji'. Pelli is marriage by negotiation while 'Raji' means marriage by elopement. The rule of exogamy of 'Kulam' is followed in both the types of marriages.

Though there is no prohibition of marrying a girl from the same village, the Chenchu young men of today as well as in the past married the girls from other villages. Though sororate and levirate marriages do occur now and then the Chenchus do resent these type of marriages.

Even in marriage by negotiation boy's and girl's opinion is taken into consideration. The negotiations start from the side of the boy. The father accompanied by his friends and relatives visits the girl's parents. If the negotiations are successful, the boy's father offers liquor to all the people present. The Chenchus say that invariably it is the boy who selects the girl and requests his parents to negotiate. During the negotiations, bride price is fixed and the date and day of the marriage is discussed and fixed.

Marriage ceremony is more or less like that performed among non-tribals but on a small scale and no priest is involved, if the elderly of 'Kulam' of the boy and the girl officiate at the marriage. In front of them and all the others the boy inverts marriage locket around the neck of the girl and feast follows in which lot of liquor is consumed.

'Raji' (elopement) is resorted to by those boys who think that they cannot afford to incur the expenditure on formal marriage. The boy and the girl elope to the forest and stay in the forest. When the parents of the boy and the girl come to know about this they go to the forest and bring back the couple to the boy's house. Elders of both the 'Kulam' assemble and fix a nominal bride price to be paid to the parents of the girl by the parents of the boy and with drinking of liquor provided by the father of the boy the boy and the girl are declared as married.

Kurnool District manual mentions another type of marriage ceremony in which a bow and arrow is fixed in the ground in front of the bridegroom's house and the bride and bridegroom go around the bow and arrow thrice and the elders bless them declaring the couple as husband and wife¹². A widow marrying need not go through the marriage ceremony while widower marrying goes through the marriage ceremony.

2.6.Divorce

Divorce is permitted and both men and women can initiate divorce. Usually, the causes of divorce are adultery and maladjustment between husband and wife. If the fault lies with the woman, she or her parents or if she marries again her new husband has to repay the bride price to her old husband. The council deciding the cases of divorce consists of the elders belonging to both 'Kulams' i.e., husbands and wives. When, divorce occurs

small children go with their mother but they have to return back to their father when they attain the age of 12 or 13 years.

2.8. Death

According to Chenchus, when 'Jeev' leaves person he or she dies. The 'Jeev' after death goes to 'Sami' (God). The moment, a person dies his/her body is given bath by the agnastic kin (sons, brothers, maternal uncle). Haimendorf describes the procedure of preparing the dead body. "The feet are smeared with saffron and the legs with ashes, the hair is loosened and washed and then anointed with ghee. Finally, the corpse is wrapped in the deceased own cloth. All ornaments are removed and while glass bangles and other trinkets of small value are buried with the body, the most precious ornaments of a woman are kept by her heirs"¹³. Today Chenchu practices both burial and cremation, but Haimendorf believes that once Chenchus practiced only burial. The practice of cremation is acquired from the caste communities¹⁴.

In the past, the dead were taken to burial/cremation spot within an hour or two after death and disposal was completed. Today, the Chenchu families, if a death occurs, wait till the relatives arrive. At the burial ground, each 'Kulam' has a separate area where their dead are buried or cremated. Before the corpse is taken to the burial all the assembled consume liquor. In the past they took mahua flower liquor, today they drink country arrack provided them by the family of the deceased. After reaching the burial ground, the deceased 'Kulam' people either dig the grave or prepare the funeral pyre as per the decision of the family of the deceased. After the burial or cremation is over all the people return to the settlement and only those who carried the corpse take bath while others wash their feet and all the people once again drink liquor.

Pollution lasts for 3 days or fifteen days, some Chenchus do observe obsequies on both the occasions, on 3rd day, it is called 'Cheinnadinam' (small obsequies) and 15th day is called "Peddadinam" (large obsequies). On both days, some rice is cooked, taken to the grave yard and left on the grave/place of cremation. On the 'Peddadinam' day the family prepares non-vegetarian food and serves to the people along with liquor.

Religion

Innumerable deities, spirits both benevolent and malevolent play an important role in the lives of Chenchus. Though Chenchus are said to have acquired Hindu religious elements only recently, still for centuries the Chenchus of Nallamalai have been claiming their close relationship with Srisailam Temple dedicated to Lord Mallikarjuna and Ahobilam

Temple dedicated to Lord Narasimha. The Chenchus also claim that Chenchita or Chenchu Lakshmi who became consort of Narasimha belonged to their tribe. Commenting on the religion of Chenchus Haimendorf¹⁵ says that “in its present form Chenchu religion, if I may use this term for an uncoordinated mass of beliefs and ritual, is no rigid theological system, but an expansive framework that constantly embraces and assimilates new objects and forms of worship. The difficulty in ascertaining the nature of the Chenchus’ indigenous religious beliefs lies in the fact that with the displacement of their former language by Telugu, their deities must have lost the original names.

A few of the ‘Kulams’ (clans) are associated with particular deities, both male and female. For example, Arthi ‘Kulam’ is associated with the female deity ‘Ankamma’, Avula Kulam with Lingamayya, a male deity, Dasari Kulam with ‘Pothuraju’ etc. But many of the ‘Kulams’ are not associated with any specific deity.

The most important little tradition deity worshipped by all the Chenchus is a female deity called Maisamma or Garla Maisamma. This deity is supposed to punish the enemies of Chenchus. Further, she has control over the forest and its flora and fauna. They are supposed to think about this deity and pray to her when they are on a foraging trip to the forest. Otherwise they believe they would fail in their hunting and gathering.

For the Chenchu, Bhagavathar is the Supreme God, who is responsible for birth and death. ‘Bhagavathar’ is the one who puts ‘Jeev’ (soul) into the child in the womb and when a person dies the ‘Jeev’ again goes back to the ‘Bhagavathar’. ‘Bhagavathar’ has no physical shape and he is found everywhere.

Chenchus strictly speaking had no festival of their own except numerous worships of minor and major deities. But they do enjoy preparing special food and drinking arrack during the Hindu festivals like Sreeramanavami, Nagula Chavithi and Dasara etc. Invariably their special food during these festivals consists of rice cooked with jaggery and coconut or Bengal gram, jaggery and grafted coconut.

3.Objectives Of The Study

The primary aim of the present study is to depict the ethnohistory cultural contribution and the social-cultural dynamics of the Chenchu tribe in Andhra Pradesh. This is achieved through the following specific objectives.

- To know the ethnohistory of the Chenchu tribe of Andhra Pradesh in particular viz.

- To identify the cultural contribution made by the Indian tribes to the non-tribals in Andhra Pradesh.

These specific objectives of the study clearly call forth historical and contemporary facts for analysis and interpretation of the same so as to get a holistic picture of the cultural and society of Chenchu tribes. Across several generations and in the plains as well as hilly tracts of Andhra Pradesh.

4. Methodology Of The Study

4.1. Universe Of The Study

The universe of the study includes the 33 tribes of the state of Andhra Pradesh. According to 1991 census the total population of Andhra Pradesh is 41,99,481, comprising 6.31% of the total population of the state. The tribes within the state are spread over the plain areas as well as the hill areas. The hill areas are known as scheduled areas or Agency areas, extending over 30,030.77 Square kilometers constituting 10.91% to the total geographical area of the state.

All the 33 tribes present a striking diversity marked by heterogeneous ethnic composition, diverse historical traditions and social and cultural levels. Of these 33 tribes, the Yanadis, Yerukala and Sugali are the populous tribes in the plain areas, while the Gond and Koya are the populous tribes in the Scheduled Areas. Chenchu is the most primitive tribe in the state. Thus representing the different social, cultural and economical levels of the tribes living within the state of Andhra Pradesh. The tribe namely the Chenchu is chosen for the present study.

5. The Sources Of Data

Sources for the present study come from both primary and secondary sources. However, it may be said that major part of the data comes from the primary source, field work carried out over a period of time. Secondary sources consist of written works. They consist of (1) Government published books and records, (2) Unpublished Ph.D. and M.Phil. Dissertation and (3) books published by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and others like social workers. There is no doubt that all published and unpublished sources are not of uniform standard but of unequal standard. Further, a few of them may be less authentic, but it cannot be helped; even data collected in field work (primary source) cannot be said to be hundred per cent correct because the sources of data in the

field may not be totally reliable and I as researcher may have made a mistake in understanding a few observed facts or what is being said by the inarticulate informants and even in recording the data etc.

6.Summary And Conclusion

An attempt has been made to write the ethnohistory of Chenchu tribes. Writing history of any community naturally includes writing about the process of evolution of its culture, in other words writing about the ethnography of culture change also. Lack of archaeological and scarcity of written sources of Chenchu tribes is a handicap in writing the ethnohistory of these tribe. Field work among these tribes was carried out over a period to supplement the scarce written sources. Even those available are of different standards in providing authentic information. Both data from the written sources and the data collected from field work had to be filtered before using it to find out which is nearer to truth and even assumptions which are possible and logical.

Changes occurring in economic marginalization does not mean that no changes are taking place in other aspects of these tribes. The influence of castes system and the spread of Hindu ideology are not only influencing the social structure and other non-economic aspects of their culture but also their folklore. New additions are made and a few old existing aspects are deleted in their folk songs and folk tales.

Finally to write ethnohistory of any tribe, not only in Chenchu tribe dealt with in this study but also about any tribe in the country, both historical sources. Folklore and data from contemporary field work have to be combined after weighing data's authenticity. Even to make assumptions careful examination of the data from all sources is necessary.

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