CHANGES IN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS OF CHENCHUS IN KURNOOL DISTRICT OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The current study is primarily confined to profile the changes in the life of social and religious conditions of Chenchus, the primitive tribe, who are mostly confined to foothills of low lying areas of Nallamalai hills of South India, in the Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh. Chenchus are extremely backward tribal groups because they are at the pre-agriculture stage of economy characterized by low level of literacy and who largely depend on food gathering for their survival. Over decades, the Government has been making a lot of efforts for the overall development of these primitive tribes by introducing different developmental programmes viz., ITDA, GCC, FD, IKP and MGNREGS and changed their attitude, behavior towards family, health and education, secularism, democracy, social image and group identity in terms of new ecology. Adaptability to change by Chenchus in the study region showed more than a few aspects which contributed to their social and religious transformation.

KEYWORDS: Primitive Tribes, Developmental Programmes, Social, Religious, Education Rituals

1. INTRODUCTION

India has the largest concentration of Tribals in the world population and is considered an Anthropological laboratory because of its regional, religious, ethnic, racial and linguistic diversities. There are nearly 427 types of Scheduled tribes in India, while only 35 types of Scheduled Tribes in A.P., nearly 83 % of Chenchus population is found in the districts of Kurnool, Prakasam, Guntur, Mahaboob Nagar, Nalgonda and Rangareddy which adjoin the ancestral land of Nallamalai. In the Kurnool district, the Scheduled Tribe population was 69,635, of them Chenchus are 7,915. The Government of Andhra Pradesh has categorized the Chenchus and identified as Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) along with the towel their groups. According to 2001 census, the total India population is 1028 millions and their percentage is 8.20.
In the first stage, only chenchus were identified as Primitive tribal group in the year 1975-76 Kolams and kondareddies were identified as Primitive tribal group in the Second Stage during the year 1980 The PTGs identified in the third stage during the year 1983 include konda Savara, Thotti 2 sub-group of Gadaba tribe such as Bodogadaba and Gutob Gadaba 2 sub group dongria khonda and kuttia khond 3 sub groups of porja tribe such as bondo Porja, khonda Porja, Prenngi Poja. Though 12 tribal groups including sub-group of main tribes have been identified by Government of India as Primitive tribal groups in respect of the State of Andhra Pradesh. They actually come under eight main tribal groups viz., Chenchu, Kolam, Kondareddis, Khonda, Kondasavara, Gadaba, Porja and Thoti.

1.1 The Chenchus

Chenchus are one of the extremely backward Scheduled Tribes in A.P. They are scattered throughout the country found in different areas with different names. In Madras area they are called Tamil Jungle Tribe, in Karnataka they are called Chenchus, in Orissa they are called Chenchuvandlu and in Andhra Pradesh they are called Chenchulu. The Chenchus are Telugu speaking people. These people origin some legend through animals and vegetation. It is stated that the name Chenchu is derived from a person who was under a tree i.e. chettu in Telugu. Very little is known about the history of the Chenchus. The epics (Manusmrithri) and other popular stories revealed that the Chenchus are the first dwellers of the Andhra region, much earlier than the Dravidian stock. Thurston (1909) quotes different accounts to delineate ethnic affinity with the Irulas, the Sugalis and the Yanadis. However, the Chenchus of Nallamalai hold no such connection with these tribes. The Chenchus of A.P. are one of the ethnic splinter groups were left behind by the material advance of great majority of the south Indian populations and are one of the extremely backward Scheduled Tribes in A.P.

The Chenchu is an ancient tribe traditionally known to have led a life of food gathering and hunting. Their present habitat is concerned to the rocky hills and forested plateau of Nallamalai range extending on both sides of Krishna River. They are dark complexioned and mostly short and slender in physical structure and their hair also occur with scant growth of hair on face and body. They are usually strong evenly proportioned and well built and have a very good stamina for trekking great distances in the forest. The male members carry bow and arrow for self protection and for killing small game now and then. There are internal sub-divisions to understand the social conditions of Chenchus:
1.2 Endogamous division
Chenchus are divided into 4 endogamous groups: a) Adavi Chenchu  b) Deva Chenchu  c) Krishna Chenchu and  d) Bontha Chenchu

1.3 Exogamous division
The exogamous group is an important feature of Chenchus social structure as it serves to identify a person with his patrilineage and acts as a social determinant to consider the permissibility for the partners in marriage.

Chenchus for further have been divided into many surname group called ‘intiperu’, these surname group are agnatic exogamous unit whose common descent is traceable with names of animals, trees, stones, pits and even coins the following are the exogamous group. Arith (Banna), Avual (cow), bojja (stomach), Bhumani forest pumpkin, chigurala (tender leaves), dasari (kind of forest leave), gurram hource gullaa (body boil), Gajjala (dingling bells), indla (house), jalli (a kind of fish), kudumula (round or oval shaped rice flavour preparation cooked on steam idly), mandal (a kind of forest tree), mekala (goat), nallapothula (black-he-goat), nimmala (lemon), pulisarla (tiger), savaram (sovereign), tokala (tail), thota (garden), uttaluri (souinel) chenchu do not have acknowledge about the history of origin of the group. A few people narrate stories and attach themselves legendary significance for those exogamous groups creation families in the ancient day got associated with particular activities or incidents and a related name come to be attached to that particular family.

Chenchus have not been able to develop socially, educationally, and economically along with religious circumstances on par with other tribal groups of A.P. due to their isolation and habituation to live in hilly and in accessible forest areas. The Government has been making a lot of efforts for the overall development of these primitive tribes over decades. Different developmental programmes has been introduced by the Government for the development of these tribes such as ITDA, GCC, FD, IKP and MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) which influenced the Chenchus and changed their attitude, behavior towards family, health and education, secularism, democracy, social image and group identity in terms of new ecology. Therefore in the present study, an attempt was made to observe the changes in their social and religious conditions who are mostly spread in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh.
2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Area of the Study

The study is mainly confined to the Chenchu Tribes distributed in the forest of Nallamalai hill ranges of the Eastern Ghats of Kurnool District in the State of Andhra Pradesh. The chief reason for taking Kurnool district for the study is that Chenchus are concentrated in large numbers in the Kurnool of Rayalaseema region. Besides this, the researcher herself hails from this district.

2.2 Sampling

Multistage random sampling was used for sample selection. For the purpose of the study, the researcher has selected Kurnool district which comprises 54 mandals, of these, Chenchus are present only in 13 mandals. Out of 13 mandals, 8 mandals have been chosen for the study where Chenchus are living in Gudems. From each mandal one gudem was selected. From each gudem 50 respondents from 8 mandals. Thus total sample size consisted 400 respondents from 8 mandals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Name of the Selected Mandal</th>
<th>Name of the Selected Chenchugudem</th>
<th>Sample collected</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Athmakur</td>
<td>Pecheruvu</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Allagadda</td>
<td>Ahobilam</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Bandiatmakur</td>
<td>Naripreddy kunta</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Kothapalli</td>
<td>Palyam cheruvu</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Mahanandhi</td>
<td>RS Gajulapalli</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>chagalamarri</td>
<td>DV. chenchugudem</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Rudravaram</td>
<td>Harinagaram</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Srisailam</td>
<td>Makala banda</td>
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Total 8 8 400

3. Developmental programmes

ITDA (Integrated Tribal Development Society Authorities), a government of A.P. organisation created for implementing the developmental programmes for Chenchus such as agricultural subsidy, free oxen, agricultural implements, seeds fertilizers, irrigation facilities, health and education etc. The integrated development agency (ITDA) is coordinating the efforts of government agency and the non government schemes to the maximum extent.

Role of Girijana Cooperative corporation (GCC) in shaping the new ecology cannot be ignored the Girijana Cooperative Society has encouraged the Chenchus to depend more on the collection of Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) then on more collection of wild
products for domestic consumption. This kind of encouragement has yielded good result. The chenchus were able to involve themselves more and more in the collection of NTFP and sold it to GCC in order to get cash, as such Chenchus enjoying a special right and monopoly over renewable resources of the forest by acquiring specialized skills over the exploitation of non-timber forest produce. There are (8) DR depots in kurnool district, out of which (3) are managed by SHGs. Rs. 138.40 lakhs was annual target, out of which 120.61 lakhs is achievement for MEP procurement, DR sales, credit disbursement and credit recovery.

Forest Department (FD) to become a major contributor to new ecology. It has established agriculture, horticulture and afforestation in all the three zones of the Chenchus. Further, it has encouraged management of forests through Joint Forest Management, Community forest management programme and Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) in rising new forests. The forest department has made every effort to encourage the Vana Samrakshana Samiti (VSS) at every village level has achieved success only to a limited extent. VSS will protect initially 50 hectares of land each year and 250 hectares in 5 years and also grow forest species. Later, they would be encouraged to grow forest species useful to the villagers. They are eligible for 50% share of produce from yield from the forest protected or grown by them and 100% share of MEP available. The activities of VSS are Grazing control, fire control, forest protection, SMC works, plantation, singling, weeding, check dams and RFDs works.

Under MGNREGS, A.P. is considered among top performers generating more than 320 million person-days of employment and receiving Rs. 3,781 crore of funds from the scheme in 2009-10. Kurnool has been ranked at the top once and second twice in the last three years of MGNREGS implementation, based on key parameters among 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh. The district has 1.567 million adults enrolled under the Scheme and issued job cards. Under this programme 21 no. of habitations are coverage of Village Organization (V.O.), of which 18 no. of gudems are started works. Rs.83.98 lakhs towards wage paid to 1792 no.of wage seekers. From August’2009 onwards 18 VOs are implementing this special strategy exclusively for Chenchu wage seekers. Under this strategy each adult wage seeker will be provided 100 days regular wage employment @ Rs. 100/- per day. So far 2260 wage seekers were registered in 122 Srama Sakthi Sangalu in 21 habitations. Out of Rs. 109 lakhs released to VOs Rs. 83.5 lakhs distributed under wage component of Chenchus.

Indira Kranti Patakam (IKP) is a state wide poverty reduction project to enable the rural poor to improve their livelihoods and quality of life through their own organizations.
Under this Project (1325) Chenchu households are covered. An amount of Rs.153.00 lakhs was sanctioned under CIF for various schemes for the benefit of Chenchus. The plans main objective of the plan is formation of Community Based Organizations with the targeted primitive tribal groups of Chenchus in 26 Chenchu gudems (habitations) of Kurnool district for overall development of the community. In the district out of 1402 families identified 1325 families have been organized into 123 self help groups in all the 26 Chenchu gudems. In the remaining 77 families still there are 42 families eligible and efforts are being made to include them into SHG fold. With these 123 SHGs, 21 Village organizations were formed and these VOs are federated into 4 Chenchu Mandala Samakhyas at mandal level in the district at Atmakur, Kothapally, Bandi Atmakur, Chagalamarri and Allagadda.

4. Changes in Social and Religious conditions

By implementing the above development programmes such as ITDA, GCC, FD, IKP etc., there is amendment in the life style of Chenchus especially in their social and religious conditions.

The Integrated Tribal Development Programme (I.T.D.A) adopted the area under study in the year 1975-76. To assess the impact of the developmental programmes of both I.T.D.A and other general developmental trends in the neighborhood, an attempt is made to examine such variables as education, child labour, and age at marriage, employment generation, and cultural transformation. The two decades of developmental intervention by I.T.D.A. has ushered in perceptible and appreciable social transformation and change of life style among the Chenchus under study.

The rehabilitation of the Chenchus, who were formerly isolated primitive tribals, notorious for highway dacoity, was rather successfully accomplished by the ITDA. This is achieved by rehabilitating Chenchus. Rehabilitation of Chenchus in new settlement colonies which are provided with pucca housing and other amenities such as electricity and drinking water; school and the provision of alternate employment opportunities, allotment of agricultural land, bank loans these efforts enabled the Chenchus for the first time in centuries to lead a peaceful sedentary life. The practice of agriculture, agricultural labour, poultry, business, formal schooling brought them close to the main streams of population and facilitated greater social intervention. Thus the barriers of social isolation have been broken and ushered a change of life style.
The close contact and interaction with the officials, other neighbouring villagers, and the impact of schooling also had gradually led them to a greater social awareness and in particular awareness about their rights. In other words, the developmental interventions have led to a slow but steady process of social empowerment of Chenchus in the areas of education, marriage, employment, observance of festivals and rituals, and in their general lifestyle.

4.1 Education

The I.T.D.A. and the general developmental programmes are of a recent phenomenon for the last two decades. They have contributed to the increasing levels of literacy attainments among Chenchus of younger generation. Education helps to stimulate and accelerate the process of change by cultivating knowledge, skills and values appropriate to the changing socio-economic and political structure. In the present study, out of 400 respondents a majority of 52.75 percent of respondents are illiterates, 29 percent are at primary education level, 17.50 percent are at secondary school level and only 0.75 percent respondents are inter and above level. No female respondents have the intermediate education and above. When observed the education level among children, out of 800 children 51% are illiterates, 25% are at primary level, 22.50% are at secondary level land only 1.5% are inter and above education level. At different levels of education, a drop out among children was observed due to so many reasons. Out of 141 dropout children, 58.87% are drop out at primary level, 23.40% are at middle school level and 25% are dropout at high school level. It concludes that majority of children are dropout at primary level.

4.2 Marriage

Marriage by negotiation, marriage by elopement and marriage by mutual consent were found to be dominant methods of acquiring wives found among the chenchus. Previously, the elopement and love marriages were very frequent, but with the spread of education, various employment outside the village, large scale migration of plains people into the Chenchu habitat accelerating interaction with the advanced groups. Marriage by negotiation seems to be on the increase. So there is tremendous change in the marriage among the Chenchus. In the present study, out of 400 respondents, 58.25 percent are followed arranged marriages by their parents and elders, 27.75 percent of respondents are followed love marriage by mutual understanding of spouses, 14 percent of respondents are preferred the elopement marriages. It is highly acceptable in the Chenchu tribe.
Widow Remarriage and marriage with a divorced woman are permitted. Sometimes, they are found to live with their children in a separate house without being married again. A divorced woman can marry a person of her choice, but the information about her divorce should be announced and approved by Nasab (kula panchayat). In some cases, widows and divorced women are taken as second wives. From the present data, it was observed that a majority of respondents (88.75%) are married, 5.75% of respondents are divorced and remaining 5.5 percent belongs to widow/widower.

The age at marriage ranges from 15 years for men and from 14 years for women. The Chenchu marriage is very simple; often acquire a mate through elopement. The boy and girl leave the gudem (settlement) for a week and live in the forest and then the parents from both sides will take a decision to arrange marriage between them. Both kinds of cross-cousin patrilateral and multilateral marriages are practiced but multilateral cross-cousin marriages are much preferred. Sister’s daughter is also a potential mate for marriage. From the data, it was observed that the majority of 45% respondents got married in between the age of 16-25 years, 28% respondents got married from 11 to 15 years of age. 20% respondents got married between the age of 21 to 25 years and only 7% respondents got married after the age of 25 years. There are no marriages below the age of 10 years.

Monogamy is the most prevalent form of marriage among the Chenchus, polygyny is also practiced, but it is rare. Cross-cousin marriage among the Chenchus is the most preferred alliance. Generally, maternal cross-cousin (mother’s brother’s son) or paternal cross-cousin (father’s sister’s daughter) or maternal-uncle (mother’s brother) is given first preference in the matter of selection of bridegroom. In the present data, the relationship in mate selection was observed in Chenchus. Out of 400 respondents, 51.75% were married by cross-cousin relation, 24% were selected the mate as uncle-niece relationship and 24.25% were married the distant ones.

Marriage is a significant event in the developmental process of Chenchus families. After marriage under patrilocal rule of residence, the woman joins her husband’s house. Bride price (oli) is practiced but now-a-days dowry is also accepted. The Chenchus bride-groom is traditionally expected to pay bride price. There is no much variation in bride price. Generally, they are expected to pay Rs.20 and 80/- as bride price to the bride’s father or uncle. Majority of the families are found paying bride price in the form of money only. The marriage for girls is conducted only after attaining puberty. Pre-puberty marriages are mostly prohibited. It is very rare. The bride groom must also be matured enough to carry on life with his wife.
From the data, it was observed that a majority of 29 percent respondents received the money from Rs.5000 to 6000 at the time of marriage and a minimum number of respondents with 2.5 percent were received sum of Rs.9000 during marriage.

4.3. Family

The Chenchu families are predominantly nuclear. A majority of the Chenchu families constitute man and his wife and their unmarried young children. Sometimes some relatives of either husband or wife are also seen residing in the same hut. Extended type of families (ego, his wife and children and ego’s father and mother and ego’s married brothers and their wives along with their children) are not common. The chenchu families are mostly 3 types viz., Nuclear families, joint families and single member families. From the observations, Out of 400 respondents, a majority of 74.25 percent respondents are living in nuclear families, 19.50 percent are in joint families and only 6.25 percent respondents are single member type of families which are rare in Chenchu respondents. Out of 400 respondents, a majority of Chenchus family size is 3 to 5 members with 58.75 percent followed by 17.25 percent are found in between 6 and 8 members, 15 percent respondents are found below 2 members and minimum respondents are found to be living in more than 9 members family size.

4.4. Dressing

The dress of the Chenchu men consist of a waist string (molatadu) made of twisted fiber and a small piece of lion cloth (goshbatta) five or six inches to cover his private part. During winter, the Chenchus warp their body with a cotton cloth which is sometimes used as a head gear (turban) some men possess two pieces of cloths for body and a turban. Young men wrap around their waist a length cloth when they go out or visit some places. The access to modern market brought changes in dress material and style. The modern dress materials are available at affordable process; and the increase in their earnings and income and even their increased interaction with plains people ushered a complete change in the “dressing style” of Chenchus. They now wear the dress that is being worn by villagers and town people. In other words now mostly one may not find a Chenchu with only a “piece of loin’s cloth.” The chenchu women have adopted the dress of the people of the plains. They wear a choli or bodice covering the upper part of the body, a sari and under the sari a short petticoat a kind of petu. Old women do not wear choli but cover the body with the folds of sari. All women possess bangles. Most women have their ears pierced and wear small rings or studs of various metals in the lobes.
and some have the nostrils perforated and wear nose studs mette or toe ring tali (marriage locket) and a string of black beads is the symbols of married status. Plastic and silver ornaments are becoming popular, among the younger generation.

4.5. Festivals and Faith
The Chenchu pantheon consists of many gods and goddesses mostly known and worshipped by the neighboring Hindu caste people. The different names of the deities are vaguely significant. They have a scanty conception of functions and origin of the deities. Almost all deities excepting a few have no shrine or abodes at all. The image of most of these deities are neither anthropomorphic nor zoomorphic but simply represented by a stone slab. The ritual specialists are not found but in a few cases certain individuals undertake the priestly activities. The Chenchus due to their interaction with the plains, have gradually absorbed some of the “great traditions” in the form of observing festivals like Deepavali, Sankranthi, and Vinayaka Chowthi etc. They also continue their “little traditions”. Sivarathri is an important festival for them. They worship all Hindu gods along with their local deities. Every year they celebrate a communal festival to goddess Porlamma.

Chenchus believe in the life after death and rebirth. Dead people are believed to join the stock of ancestors. The Chenchus worship all their ancestors belonging to male and female line lest they will be subjected to the wrath of their ancestors. Any misfortune is attributed to the wrong action of the people such as forgetting to worship, not fulfilling the promise or oath that has been taken on the name of ancestors, or gods, failing to give the names of ancestors or gods to the children etc. a few of the deities are believed to be associated with certain diseases (vomits, small pox, diarrhea, fever, paralysis, chronic pains, weakness and loss of physical growth and body weight and epidemics), mortality of domestic animals (cattle, goats), abortion and miscarriage etc. They are not however very sure of which deity is actually responsible.

The Chenchus attribute supernatural connotations to the Sun and the Moon and even to air and water. They hold that the nature is of mystic quality and that the natural phenomenon of rain, wind, day light and darkness are associated with spiritual power and supernatural forces. They believe that certain localities like series (honey deposits), waterholes, streams, ponds, burial grounds, hunting area, certain big-dried up trees and secreted huts and time periods especially nights are associated with spirits and deities. They also have a belief that ghosts and spirits wander during nights and hence they do not come
out of their huts alone during the nights. These places are sacred to them and they won’t allow polluting or the disturbing these places. If these places are polluted it is believed that the associated deities would become irritated and create problems to them.

Honey comb deposits to a cliff in a gorge or steep ravine are also associated with deities especially goddess Malalamma (the goddess of honey). Apart from Malalamma there are Bayanna, Veerulu, Pothuraju, Peddamma, Lingamaiah etc., are also associated with the serri. The Chenchus prepare naivedhyam (sacred food consisting of rice and jaggery) and keep it before the goddess Malalamma and the other gods before climbing down to the series. They also offer honey of first pera (honeycomb) to the deities before they eat.

Hunting grounds and the hunting activity are also associated with the deity, whom they call devara (deity) and a share in the game is given. Generally the Chenchus believe that deity Nalla Maisamma is associated with hunting. Periods of stress are interpreted as the wrath of the deity. Sometimes she alerts the same and evades from the tiger of hunters. Before setting out for hunting, the deity is praye for providing some game to fill the stomach. Chenchus also believe in witchcraft and magic. If a person is suffering from disease or series of death of animals, he will go to the person called gadde cheppevadu (divinatory). He detects the causes of the problem and performs a ritual function called datimpu to cure the problems.

4.6. Recreation
A visible transition is seen in the recreation practices of Chenchus. The Chenchus who were once entertaining themselves with folk traditions are now gradually shifting to modern means of entertainment such as watching TV, Cinema etc. The practice of group drinking is at times abandoned due to enforcement of social legislation. From the present study, the availability of modern gadgets viz., TV set, Radio, Cycle, scooter etc., was observed among the respondents. Out of 704 respondents, a majority of 39.77% have radio set, 32.82% have Cycles, 24.57% have Television sets, 2.27% of respondents have mixer grinders and only 0.57% of respondents have scooters and two wheelers.

From the above mentioned observations it can be evaluated that the changes and developments experienced by Chenchus under reference are within the overall context of the trends of change and development that have been taking place in the country for the past six decades. However, these changes are facilitated and accelerated on account of Development programmes interventions during the last two and half decades. The close contact and
interaction with officials as well as with the neighbouring villagers and impact of schooling, the process of democracy and social justice had gradually led them to greater social awareness in general and in particular the awareness of their rights. In other words, the developmental interventions have led to a slow but steady process of social empowerment of Chenchus. This social process has led the Chenchus to a social transition from folk society to the peasant society life practices.

REFERENCES