

CHENCHU

(A NOMADIC TRIBE OF ODISHA)



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2016



FOREWORD

The Chenchu is a very small nomadic forest tribe of Odisha who wander across the borders of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha in search of livelihood. It is said that 'Chenchu' is a person who lives under a 'Chettu' (tree). Another interpretation relates to the Chenchu's habit of eating mice (Chenchu). It is believed that the Chenchus and Yanadis (a tribe of Andhra Pradesh) descended from the same ethnic stock.

They mainly inhabit the Nallamalai Hill ranges in south eastern part of India comprising parts of undivided Andhra Pradesh. All of them claim that female deity Brahma Rambha of Srisailam belongs to their community. The history says that Chenchus are the first dwellers of Andhra region much before the Dravidians. It is believed that the Chenchus were employed by the kings of the south to protect the river Krishna and Thungabhadra.

In Odisha, they are largely found in the undivided Koraput district. They speak a language of their own called 'Chenchu' which belongs to the Dravidian language family

Being a nomadic forest dwelling and forest dependent tribe of hunters and food gatherers, they were in the past living in caverns or under the shady trees. Now they live in small huts. Most of the temporary Chenchu settlements are situated at the edge or interiors of forests to facilitate food gathering. Now, they are gradually shifting to the marginal agriculture and allied pursuits.

The tribe is divided into several exogamous kinship groups called 'kulam' or 'intiperu'. They practice early marriage and prefer cross-cousin marriage. They either bury or cremate the dead and observe mourning and pollution for ten days. Purificatory rites are held on the 3rd and the 10th day after death.

They worship a number of deities and observe rituals and festival as their neighbouring castes do. Their dances have no religious significance but performed for recreation.

Presently, tribal development programmes have made some impact in bringing about some changes in their age old way of life.

I offer my heartiest thanks to Prof. (Dr.) A. B. Ota, Director and Smt. A. Mall, Deputy Director who have worked hard for preparing this colourful handbook. Shri S.C Mohanty, OSD (R) deserves thanks for editing the Handbook. My special thanks goes to Shri Pinaki Sen, an amateur photographer for his valuable contribution of the photographs without which this book could not have been published. I hope this book will be a valuable document for the tourists, researchers and academicians alike.

Commissioner-cum-Secretary
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(A Nomadic Tribe of Odisha)

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IDENTITY

The Chenchus, also called 'Chenchuvaru' or 'Chenchwar' is numerically the smallest Scheduled Tribe of Odisha. They are an aboriginal semi-nomadic tribe of the central hill religions of Andhra Pradesh. Their traditional way of life has been based on hunting and food gathering. It is believed that the Chenchus and Yanadis (another Scheduled Tribe of Andhra Pradesh) descended from the same ethnic stock.

The ecological interpretation of the 'Chenchu' tribe indicates a person who lives under a 'Chettu' means 'tree'. Another version relates the term to the Chenchu's habit of eating mice (Chenchu). They mainly inhabit in the Nallamalai Hill ranges in south eastern part of India. The tribe is largely distributed in three districts of undivided Andhra Pradesh i.e. Mehabub Nagar, Kurnool and Guntur. All of them claim that female deity





Brahma Rambha of Srisailam belongs to their community. The history says that Chenchus are the first dwellers of Andhra region much before the Dravidians. It is believed that the Chenchus were employed by the kings of the south to protect the river Krishna and Thungabhadra.

The variation of their population in different districts of Odisha in different Census corroborates their nomadic way of life. In 1961 Census, they numbered 52 and were concentrated in Koraput district only; in 1971 Census their number drastically came down to 08 only and

they were scattered in two districts i.e., Kalahandi (06) and Sundergarh (02) and they were further scattered to five districts i.e. Ganjam (10), Kalahandi (06), Keonjhar (01), Koraput (13), Mayurbhanj (01) and Sundergarh (08) numbering total 39 persons in 1981 Census and to 11 districts i.e. Balasore (03), Bolangir (02), Cuttack (02), Ganjam (10), Kalahandi (27), Keonjhar (26), Mayurbhanj (03), Puri (05), Sambalpur (36) and Sundergarh (09) their number substantially increasing to 275 in toto in 1991 Census. In 2001 Census, their population remarkably declined to 28 only spread over in 5 districts like Malkangiri (03), Khurda (03), Sambalpur (02), Baragarh (08) and Sundergarh (12). As per the latest 2011 Census their population in the state alarmingly came down by more than 50 percent, to 13 persons only including 6 males and 7 females largely found in Nowrangpur district. Such drastic growth and decline and distribution of their population in the State in successive Censuses amply prove their nomadic life style.



In 2001 Census their literacy rate in Odisha was 46.15 percent i.e. (46.67 percent for males and 45.45 percent for females), and the sex ratio miserably stands at 647 as against 599 in 1991, 696 in 1981, 3000 in 1971 and 1476 in 1961. This is hard to believe, but their sex ratio has remarkably improved to 1167 and their literacy rate, to 54.55 percent (Males-80 percent and Females-33.33 percent) in 2011 Census.

The Chenchus speak a language of their own called 'Chenchu' - a dialect of Telugu that is a

branch of the Dravidian language family. They speak and use Telugu script for both inter and intra group communication.

The Chenchus have been classified as Proto Australoid group who have dark complexion, medium structure, a long and narrow head, round or oval facial profile, a short nose of medium breadth and average height and a well built and strong body. Their hair is wavy and curly, tied in a knot. The males grow beard and mustaches.

Dress and Ornaments

The Chenchus are scantily dressed. Now, they are no longer dressing themselves in leaves like their ancestors. The men usually wear loin cloth (gochi). They leave their hair untrimmed and make a knot at the back of the head. The women are dressed more decently than men and wear sarees.

At present, there are considerable changes in the dress pattern of Chenchu men and women. Many of the males cover the upper part of their body with cloth. The young people wear shirts but the children of one to three years age remain naked. Chenchu do not decorate themselves except having few tattoo marks on hands, face, chest and legs. Men do not wear any ornaments, but women wear cheap metal ornaments like ear rings, nose rings, necklaces, bangles, armlets etc. purchased from the peddlers or from the local market.



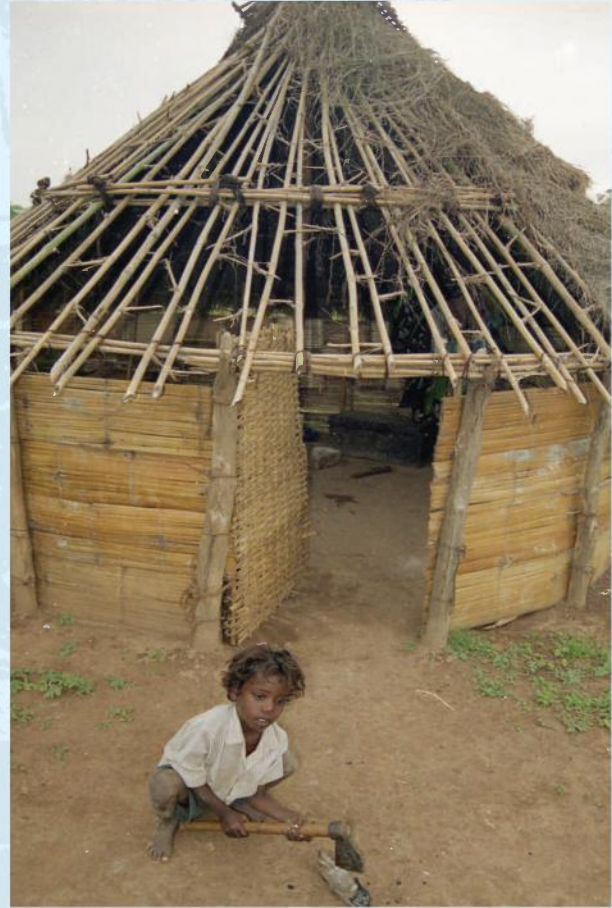
HABITAT, SETTLEMENT & HOUSING



In the past, the Chenchus had no houses and were roaming in the jungle and living under trees or in rock shelters because they were completely dependent on forest for their livelihood and wandered from place to place in search of food. Their habitations mainly lied in the hills and thick forests along the Krishna River and its tributaries. The height of these places varies between 600 and 900 meters above the mean sea level.

Now, there is a marked change in their settlement pattern and the Chenchu settlements are more or less permanent, even though they make temporary camps in the jungle like Mankirdia (one of the PTGs of Odisha) for hunting and food gathering. Though most of the Chenchu villages are situated at the edge of the forest, some of their villages are situated in the interiors of thick forests. The temporary camps are occasionally set in the interior forest to facilitate collection of seasonal Minor Forest Produce and other products from the forest.

The Chenchus live in small and widely dispersed settlements called *gudem* or *penta*. In cleared patches of forest, they set up their settlement. It consists of several scattered clusters of small conical huts varying from 5-8 in number. There is a minimum distance of 5-6 Kms. between two adjacent *gudems* which are usually located near the natural water sources and are constructed on elevated places. The grouping of huts is invariably based on kinship affiliations. Each family has its own huts. The families are generally monogamous. After marriage sons construct separate huts near their parent's hut.



The huts in the settlement are built with bamboo wattle walls. Generally 3 types of huts i.e *chuttu gudisha* (round hut), *mula gudisha* (square hut) and *kottamu* (rectangular hut) are found in a Chenchu settlement. The *chuttu gudisha* is the traditional type that is generally thatched with *katterra gaddi* (forest grass) and is usually not partitioned inside. But *kottamu* is partitioned into kitchen, food store and goat pen. In few huts, one or two goats and

dogs are allowed to sleep with the family members at night. A bamboo fence is built around a single hut or a group of huts. Some of them construct small house adjacent to the main house for the livestock.

Due to suspicion of the attack of wandering evil spirits in the settlement or occurrence of frequent deaths, they shift the settlement to a new place. Even within the settlement the individuals shift their huts from one place to another due to quarrels and conflicts with neighbours as well as death and frequent illness of family members.

Household Possessions:

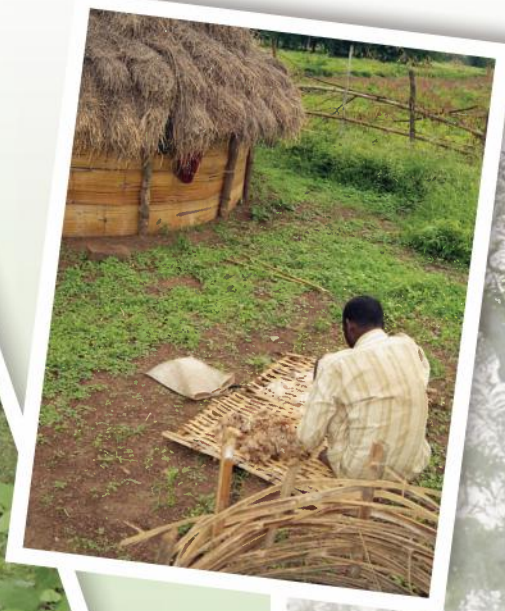
Because of their nomadic nature, they always prefer to possess a few household articles. Among these, there are bows and arrows, a knife, an axe, a digging stick, some pots and utensils made of aluminum, grinding stone, one or two small boxes and a few clothes. They sleep on the floor. Three bricks or stones kept in a triangular shape are used as hearth. Now-a-days, they are using a few agricultural implements and weapons for defense and hunting purpose.



LIVELIHOOD

The traditional occupation of the Chenchu is hunting and food gathering. The forest areas inhabited by the Chenchu are infested with wild animals like bear, tiger, *sambar*, spotted deer, fowl, panther, antelope, wild pig, cat, peacock, wild fowls, snakes, lizards, scorpions and various kinds of birds. The Chenchus supplement their food with the flesh of these animals, which they hunt with their bow and arrows. During hunting, they take the help of their pet dogs. Besides, they collect seasonal forest products like wild fruits, roots, tubers, green leaves, gum, resin, *mahua* flowers, honey etc and after meeting their domestic consumption needs, they sell the surplus in the local market to get some income which is spent on buying their other necessities.





At present, the nomadic Chenchus are slowly opting for agriculture. Some of them are cultivating forest lands and have encroached Government lands. They practice agriculture in a very small scale. Their agriculture activities are seasonal and rain fed and hence the yield is meager. They usually cultivate crops like Bajra, Jowar and other rain fed minor millets.

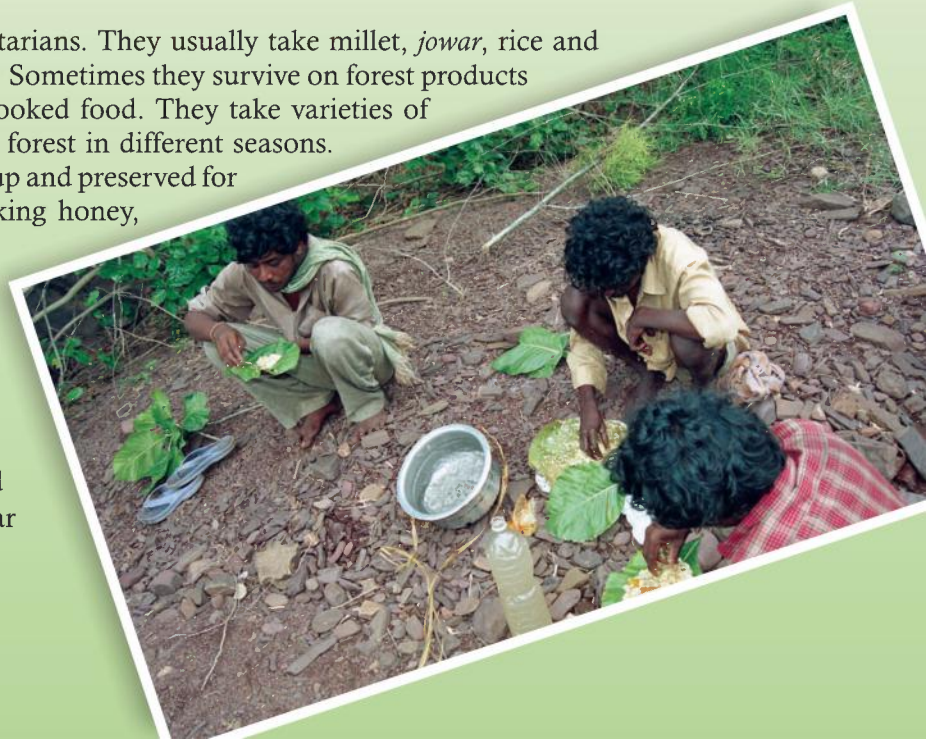
Besides, they take up livestock rearing, wage earning and are now getting employed in Government and Non Government sectors. They purchase food grains and other essential commodities from nearby market. Some families also brew and sell liquor for extra income.



Food and Drinks:

The Chenchus are generally non-vegetarians. They usually take millet, *jowar*, rice and maize, tuber and flesh of wild animals. Sometimes they survive on forest products for several days without taking any cooked food. They take varieties of fruits, roots, tubers collected from the forest in different seasons. The surplus roots and tubers are dried up and preserved for future use. They are very fond of taking honey, tubers and flesh of animals.

The Chenchu are addicted to drinking and smoking. They brew *mahua* liquor for self consumption and sale. Drinking of country liquors is a daily routine. They also smoke country made cigarettes, tobacco rolled in *sal* leaf (Bidi) which is very popular among them.



SOCIAL LIFE

The principal units of the Chenchu social organization are the Kulam, the Gumpu and the family. The tribe is divided into several exogamous groups or clans locally known as *kulams*. These groups are also known as *intiperu* whose names are used as surnames by the members of respective *intiperus*. The members belonging to the same *kulam* are known as *kulapollu*. Exogamy is followed within a *kulam* as the members of the same *kulam* are considered to be the descendants of a common ancestor and hence, related by blood. According to Chenchu, there are 64 *kulams* within the tribe but 1961 census has identified only 26 *kulams*. Each Chenchu settlement comprises members belonging to several *kulams*.

Apart from the exogamous group of *kulam*, there is small local kinship groups composed of 5 to 10 families called 'Gumpu'. These are labour co-operatives in which the group members assist each other in different types of economic activities like house construction, agricultural works, hunting, honey collection etc. Working in a group they exploit the food resources and share the hunted games among the members.



Family is the most important and the very basic institution in the Chenchu society. The Chenchu families are generally nuclear consisting of a man, his wife and their unmarried children. Generally, the married sons live in separate houses. In some cases, the old parents live with their married sons. They lead a co-operative life. Both husband and wife enjoy equal status and are equally responsible for the maintenance of the family. Divorce is socially permitted for marital incompatibility.

The Chenchu family is patriarchal and patrilineal in nature. The eldest male member of the family takes care of the property and supervises the

family affairs. Inheritance goes through male line and ancestral property is divided equally among all the sons. Women supplement the family income by undertaking various outdoor works besides household works.



LIFE CYCLE :

Pregnancy & Childbirth

The Chenchu consider birth, puberty, adolescence, marriage and death as the turning points in their life. They believe that birth of a child is the blessing of the God. Stoppage of menstruation is taken as the first sign of pregnancy. The initial pregnancy condition is called *bycala*. Most of the expectant mothers perform routine household works in the early stages and not allowed to do hard works in the advanced stage. They have observed that pregnancy lasts for 9 months for a male child and 10 months for a female child. The pregnant woman is prohibited to go to burial ground, touch a corpse, take cooked food from any deceased's house or attend a girl undergoing menstrual pollution.

Among the Chenchus, the first delivery generally takes place in the wife's mother's house. An experienced elderly woman or a midwife (*mantrasani*) belonging to the tribe attends the pregnant woman during the time of delivery. In case of difficult delivery, the help of medicine man is taken. In serious cases, the service of a doctor is sought. It is believed that difficult delivery is caused by the wrath of some angry deity or spirit.

After the delivery, the placenta and waste matter (*parupu*) is buried by the side of the hut. The baby is given honey and little water after birth. For drying up of the naval region, turmeric powder,

ashes of burnt cloth mixed with castor oil is applied. Now-a-days, they are using Boric Acid with bandage locally called *boddumanudu* for healing of naval cord. The head of the baby is anointed with castor oil and covered with a piece of cloth. Sometimes they keep onions in the ears of the baby and tie a piece of cloth around its head to prevent ear diseases.

The midwife stays throughout the period of birth pollution that lasts for 5 to 10 days for nursing the mother and the child. She is given cooked food and some remuneration for her services. During this period, the mother is not allowed to move around or touch anything or participate in any religious ceremony. After the pollution period is over, the mother takes purificatory bath anointing her body with turmeric paste and groundnut or coconut oil except the head on that day. The lactating mother is prohibited to take chicken, gourd, eggs, and rabbit meat as it is considered dangerous to the health of the baby and the mother. After delivery, the mother takes rest for one to four months depending upon her and her baby's health conditions.

Name Giving, First Hair Cutting and Rice Eating ceremony

The child is named at any time, even 2/3 years after his/her birth. The male child is called *mugenna* and the female child, *mugemma* before naming them. Tonsure or the first hair cutting ceremony is an important ritual among the

Chenchu. All the relatives are invited to attend the ceremony. Maternal uncle first cuts three tufts of hair and the remaining part is cut by the barber near the shrines of the deities if a vow has been taken or else in the village. When the child becomes eight months old, first rice eating ceremony is observed by keeping boiled tuber in his/her mouth.

Puberty Rite

The Chenchu girl usually attains puberty (*samarthadindi / rajaswaralu / pedamanishi ayyindi*) at the age of 12 to 15 years. The menstruating girl sits on a mat in one corner of the house smeared with cow dung pest and articles like broom stick, one iron knife or a sickle or an iron rod kept by her side to protect her from evil influence. Pollution is observed for 5-10 days in different areas and the girl is restricted not to cook or touch the household articles. During this period, children and men are not allowed to go to the girl or the girl is not allowed to perform any worship or to do any manual work. After the pollution period is over, she takes a ceremonial bath and the articles used by her during that period are thrown away. Blood relatives are invited to attend the puberty ceremony and present gifts and new cloths to the girl.



Marriage

Marriage is a very important event in a Chenchu's life. The Kulam being exogamous, marriage within the same *kulam* is treated as incestuous and therefore, strictly tabooed. Further, marriage between the members of brother *kulam* is also prohibited.

The Chenchu get married at the early age of 15-18 years. Maternal and paternal Cross Cousin marriages are allowed in their society. Monogamy is common though polygyny is allowed if considered necessary. If the spouse dies or divorces, remarriage usually takes place.





Generally, three types of marriages like arranged marriage (*PELLI*), love and elopement marriage and mutual agreement (*maji*) marriage are in vogue in their society. In all types of marriage, clan (*kulam*) exogamy is strictly observed. A Chenchu prefers to select a bride from the outside of their *gudem*.





In an arranged marriage, after selection of the girl, the groom's parent or the mediator, locally known as Raju/ Mantri/ Kalagadu visits the bride's house for finalization of the marriage proposal after settlement of the bride price which varies between Rs. 5 and Rs.25 in cash and is given to bride's uncle. Marriage is performed in bride's house. At the time of marriage, bride and bridegroom wear yellow clothes dyed in turmeric solutions.

The Chenchu marriage ceremony though in general is associated with a series of rites; they are not so colourful like those of other tribes. The well-to-do families invite low grade Telugu Brahman priest (*nagayya*) to officiate in wedding ceremonies. The priest utters mantras, sprinkles holy water on the couple and ties marriage locket (*talibattu*) around the bride's neck. The bride and groom eat the betel leaves from each other's mouth. The wedding feast is given to the invitees i.e., the friends, relatives and fellow villagers and the expenditure is shared by both the parties.

Divorce is permitted in their society in case of ill health, adultery, barrenness, misbehavior and maltreatment. After divorce, the man and woman are free to remarry.

Death

Death is considered to be natural in the old age. Chenchus think that the soul leaves the body to go near the God. Either cremation or burial is done for disposing of the dead body. The news of death is communicated to all the kins. The family of the deceased waits for the arrival of all the important relatives. After their arrival they bath the corpse and decorate it marking it with three vertical marks (*naman*) with lime powder and vermilion on its chest, forehead and middle of legs, hands and palms. Coconut oil is annointed on its head and its hair is neatly combed. They put some incense (*sambrani*) on the dead body and cover it with a cloth.

The bier is made with a long bamboo pole. The parental uncle and another person from the same clan carry the bier on their shoulders. The bier is accompanied by a group of clan members. On the way to burial ground

the dead body is kept on the ground at a place called *dimpudu kallam* or resting place. All of them remove the piece of cloth covering the face of the dead body and look in to his face for three minutes. It is believed that the deceased person may sometimes come back to life at that place. Along with the dead body, articles like jaggery, jowar, and Bengal gram are carried to the burial ground.

The common burial ground for all the Chenchu clans is located outside the settlement. The paternal uncle gives first stroke and then the clan members dig the pit. Ankanna (the paternal uncle) cuts the red thread waist band of the dead person and removes the *gochi* (loin cloth) from the dead body. Thus the dead body is buried naked with the belief that man is born naked and should leave the world as such. The corpse laid in the pit, facing up wards and its head towards the north. They cover the dead body with the cloth that has been tied to bier and keep its *gochi* by its side. All the belongings of the deceased are buried. Generally costly items like ornaments are removed and returned to its family members. At first Ankanna throws a handful of earth in the grave over the dead body and others follow the suit and cover the ground with earth.

After the burial is over, all the members return without turning back and wash their face, hands, legs and are served with liquor. Vermillion mark is applied on their foreheads. All the participants again wash their heads and legs with the water at the spot where dead body was bathed. Ankanna enters the hut first and ignites an earthen lamp at the spot where the person has died. Then all his

company goes to that spot with folded hands and then they return to their homes. No food is cooked on that day and no hearth is lit in the house of the deceased on that day. The widow of the deceased remains outside the hut.

The next day, the funeral party is assembled again and a fowl is sacrificed at the spot where the person died and food is cooked and served first to the soul of the deceased and then it is distributed to all the members. They are also served with liquor after which they return to their respective houses.

The Chenchus observe mourning and death pollution for ten days. Purificatory rites are held on the 3rd and the 10th day of death to which all the kith and kin are invited to attend.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & PRACTICES

The Chenchu worship gods and goddesses of neighboring Hindu caste people along with their own tribal deities. Most of their deities are represented by stone slabs. In each village, the village deity is installed under a tree and propitiated. Lord Venkateswar is their traditional deity. There is Garelamai -Sama, the deity of jungle who is prayed before and after hunting. When an animal is killed, a piece of its flesh is offered to the deity. The Chenchus are supposed to kill only male animals to avoid the anger of the female deity though sometimes the deity is also addressed as father. Their taboo against killing female game animals is an excellent tradition of conservation of wild life.

They celebrate all the Hindu festivals. Sivaratri is an important festival for them. They worship Srisaila Mallanna (Lord Siva) and Lord Narasimha on the day of Sivaratri. Besides, the

benevolent village deities like Poleramma, Ankamma, Sunkamma, Peddanna, Poturaju, Mallamma, Marremma, Manthanalamma etc are propitiated in all the times of crises. Lachamma Thakurani is worshipped before planting of crops. Gangamma is the water deity to whom they offer prayer at the time of crossing water and when the hair of the child is cut for the first time.

Community worship is rare among the Chenchus. In their society, women do not take part in any ritual activities except making offerings of cooked food and clothing to appease the ancestors. There is no priest to conduct their rituals, but in a few cases certain individuals undertake the priestly activities. They offer animal sacrifices to appease their traditional deities.

They believe in spiritual and supernatural powers, witchcraft, black magic, oath, ordeal and evil eye.



They have specialists who perform both white magic and black magic. The practitioner of white magic is called 'Gaddecheppuvaru' who diagnoses the causes of disease in a state of spirit possession and suggests remedial measures. Chenchu have their own methods of treatment with medicinal herbs for various types of diseases. Some deities are believed to be associated with certain diseases. If a person suffers from a disease or there are frequent animal deaths, he goes to the shaman called 'Gaddecheppevadu' who detects the cause of the problem and performs a ritual called 'Datimpu' for solution of the problem.

The Chenchus believe in rebirth and life after death. They worship all their male and female ancestors. Any misfortune is attributed to the wrong action of the people relating to ancestors. They offer new clothes and cooked food to their ancestors during family rituals.

Music and Dance

Unlike other tribal groups, dance has no religious significance for them. It is performed for social recreation. Their main dance called 'Chenchu Natakamu', is a step dance (with springs and tilting steps) and drum beat dance (holding the tip of the saree in one hand and swinging it in *nrithyam*

to the beat of the drum). In addition to this, singing at night and during festival days are also done.

Though they do not have songs connected with ceremonies or festive occasions, the main theme of their songs is 'love and romance'. Chenchu Patalu, Issurrayee Patalu (while grinding), Cata Patalu (while winnowing), Pokiri Patalu (fun and amusement) are sung during performance of different activities and for amusement.



SOCIAL CONTROL

The traditional political institution of the Chenchus at the village level is called Kulapanchayat or Nasab or Panchayati (the council of village elders). It is an independent body which comprises a group of elderly men and representatives of each Kulam. It is held either in the village at a convenient place or outside the village usually under a tree. The Panchayat delivers judgment on the matters relating to the village people and its resolutions are confined to the respective *gudems* only. If the dispute involves the residents of two neighboring *gudems*, then the elderly persons of both the *gudems* assemble at a place to settle the dispute.

The Kulapanchayat is headed by the traditional secular leader called Raju – the village head man. He is assisted by other functionaries called Manthri (Secretary) and Kolegadu (Messenger). Generally, the leaders are chosen unanimously considering their age, experience and skills in articulating and solving the problems. The Raju must hail from the Kulam of original settlers of the *gudem* and Manthri and Kolegadu hail from numerically preponderant Kulam. Their Kulam may not be one and the same.

The main functions of the panchayat are (1) administration of justice, (2) settlement of intra-village and inter-village disputes and (3) Promotion of general welfare. The Panchayat punishes the offenders, levies fines, orders penalty feasts and in very serious cases, expels a person from the village or even from the tribe. Raju must abide by the advice of all the members before awarding punishment to the offenders or passing a resolution.

The panchayat usually deals with different cases like elopement, quarrel due to suspicion and mutual distrust, divorce, violation of tribal



endogamy, petty theft and other minor disputes. In case of adultery, the guilty are summoned before the panchayat and the culprits are fined. If divorce occurs on account of wife's fault, the wife's father or guardian is required to pay *thappu* (compensation/penalty) levied by panchayat to the husband. For major crimes and murders, they report to the police.

Besides settling disputes, the headman also plays an important role in socio- religious and economic affairs of the village. The Chenchus annually propitiate the village goddesses to save themselves from her wrath. On this occasion, he collects subscriptions from the village and purchases the required articles for performing the worship.



CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

Due to their nomadic way of life, the Chenchus are not yet recognized as a native tribe of Odisha. The concerned ITDAs of Odisha has been making attempt to permanently settle the bands of Chenchu by identifying and marking the border between two states in the forest areas across which they wander. Though Chenchus are residing in the jungle, they use to visit the adjacent plains villages to exchange forest produces for certain essential items like salt, chilli, rice, jowar etc. Establishment of various Government institutions has further brought the Chenchus in contact with the society at large. The development programmes implemented in remote Chenchu settlements have brought certain changes in their life style. Government has extended educational facilities, health facilities and has taken steps for their socio economic development.

As a result, the Chenchus are adopting different new occupations for their livelihood. Their

economy is now linked to the market economy and now they use money as the medium of exchange. The impact of modernization is reflected in their dress pattern, livelihood and socio-economic and political life. Some of them are watching movies in the neighboring towns. However, their association with forest is almost intact and even now they live in the forest as hunters and food gathers while adopting certain changes in their living pattern.







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