

**NATURE IN THE CULTURE OF FOREST DWELLING PEOPLE: A
STUDY OF THE CHENCHUS IN ANDHRA PRADESH**

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ABSTRACT

Human activities have been perceived as the sources of environmental degradation. Culture is seen as the mediator between the human beings and their environments which ensures sustainable utilisation of the ecological resources and to ensure human security and survival. In this context it is imperative to identify how human beings living in different ecological setting view about their surroundings and how they are negotiating with their surrounding nature. The current paper discusses the world view of the Chenchu - the primitive tribal group- inhabiting in the Nallamalai forests of Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh state. An attempt has been made to understand the view of the Chenchus about the physical surroundings, including the formation of earth, rivers, origin of flora, etc. Further it is discussed how the Chenchus see the similarities between their lifestyles and the comportment of animals and birds with which they are familiar. In a nutshell this paper is all about how the nature is constructed in the Chenchus' culture. It concludes that culture needs to be firmly placed in the environmental discourses and policies.

KEY WORDS: animal behaviour, cultural determinism, environmental discourse, human activities, nature, world view.

1. Introduction

Environmental discourse has become one the important public debates. This is due to the fact that human activities have increasingly been identified as the sources of environmental degradation (Milton, 1996). There is a wide agreement in this discourse that, if environmental damages are to be curtailed , the human perception , activities towards the environment are be changed. This perception generates the question that, can cultural understanding of the people living in a specified environment help reducing the environmental damages? This argument places the culture at the centre of the debate regarding the relationship between the human beings

and their environment. Milton (1996) argues that culture needs to be firmly established at the centre of ecological anthropology.

In anthropological discourse it is assumed that human beings are incapable to live without culture. 'Culture...is something which man interposes between himself and his environment in order to ensure his security and survival' (Carneiro 1968:551-3). This assumption reflects in the assertion that human beings enter the world with their programmes for living incomplete (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:65ff). As per outer world is concerned the mind of a new-born child is like a clean slate, on which society writes its 'reality' and script which the child is to observe from cradle to the burial ground.

Every society has philosophical or mythological explanations about the natural world and human beings' place in it. It is through such explanations that members of society articulate both their behaviour as individuals and understand the requirements of survival (Moran, 2006). The world views are developed based on the thoughts confined to each community. The flourishing of ethnographic interest in people's world views helped establish a new orthodoxy in cultural theory (Milton, 1996). Studies of folk knowledge demonstrated that a very wide range of phenomena, even apparently basic perceptual categories like colours, are subject to cultural variation (Conklin 1955). It is impossible to have diversity of cultural perspectives in reality if it is assumed that there is just one real world in which all societies live. The poststructuralist in both sociology and anthropology argued that these world views are 'constructed' through people's social experience (Milton, 1996). Sapir posits that 'the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached' (1961:69).

Therefore the different constructions of the nature are manifested in cultural variations. The nature and meanings of the surrounding natural world are constructed not based on only physical substance. Even some "supernatural" things become part of natural world. "Often, what we would call supernatural entities are quite "natural," or on the borderline between natural and

not, from other religions' perspectives. It all depends on what one's conception of nature is; if ghosts or gods exist in "nature," then they are natural too after a fashion" (Eller, J.D. 2007). The people imbue the natural world with meanings that are culturally constructed. In the forest dwelling communities for example, the selection and prohibition of certain areas for human activities is not based on by the means of rationalized understandings, but purely on belief systems.

The broad aim of present paper is to elucidate the beliefs, cultural notions of the Chenchus about the surrounding physical world including floral and faunal resources and the landscape, etc.

2. Methodology

2.1. Area of the Study.

The present study is conducted among the Chenchu - a primitive hunting and gathering tribe- inhabiting in the Nallamalai forest of Andhra Pradesh. The Nallamalai forests sprawled both in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states of India. The Nallamalai forest is the ancestral land of the Chenchus (Reddy, 2010). Seventy per cent of their population is confined to the four districts namely Kurnool, Prakasham, and Guntur in Andhra Pradesh and Mahaboobnagar in Telangana state (Gangadharam, 1999). Eight sample settlements namely, Alatom, Chintala, Guttalachenu, Marrripalem, Nekkenti, Palutla, Panthanal and Ponnlabailu, from Prakasham district of Andhra Pradesh are selected for the present study. The sample settlements were purposively selected by following the criteria: 1) practice of relatively higher degree of hunting and gathering way of life compared to the other Chenchu settlements; 2) relatively less external contacts and less influence from the lifestyles of the plain land people, 3) less dependence on the other livelihood sources like agriculture, wage labour, etc, 4) located in deep forests and less accessible to the outsiders.

2.2. Tools and Techniques for Data Collection

The present research is exclusively qualitative in its nature. In order to gather the information, the techniques like narrative interview, case study method and focus group

discussions (FGDs) were employed. In-depth interview were conducted with the key informants to collect the information about the creation of the world and their beliefs about their deities. To exemplify the issues like communal rites, observation of the Chenchus about the behaviour of animals and birds, some real cases that took place in sample settlements, were also discussed in-depth in the interaction with the subjects.

2.3. Limitation

The information was collected from the Chenchus residing only in eight settlements of Prakasham district of Andhra Pradesh. If the sample size is enlarged, i.e. includes the Chenchu settlements of the plain areas which have higher degree of contacts with agrarian communities, or to the settlements of other districts, or to the settlements of the Chenchus of the Telangana state, the Chenchus' world view may differ from what is discussed in the present paper. Hence, the author is cognizant about the limitation of the study and does not claim this is the absolute and complete world view of the whole Chenchus community.

3. The Views on Nature

3.1. Origin of Earth, Floral and Faunal Resources

The surface of the earth what geology textbooks call is the 'physical landscape'. How do hunters and gatherers perceive this aspect of their environment? Ingold (2000) observes that among the Pintupi of the Gibson Desert of Western Australia, people say that the landscape was formed, once and for all time, through the activities of theriomorphic beings, ancestral to humans as well as to all other living things, who roamed the earth's surface in an era known conventionally as the Dreaming. Such ideas and viewpoints are prevalent in aboriginal tribes of Australia, Africa, South Asia and South America. For instance, the Yanomamo worldview as presented by Napoleon Chagnon included a four-layered reality, "like inverted dinner plates: gently curved, round, thin, rigid, and having a top and bottom surface" (1992: 99 quoted from Eller, 2007). The Dogon of Africa, according to Marcel Griaule (1965), had a remarkably intricate cosmology and a cosmogonic story to go with it. Ogotemelli, his informant, told a genesis story in which the One God Amma created the sun and moon through the art of pottery:

the sun is like a pot “surrounded by a spiral of red copper with eight turns. The moon is the same shape, but its copper is white” (Griaule. 1965: 16 quoted from Eller op. cit.)

Chenchus have a notion about the world that, it consist of their own territory and the territories belonging to the other communities .They identify other communities as ‘*pallapollu*’- meaning people of plain or low lands. They maintain their distinctive identity as forest dwellers and they are proud of being dwelling on hills and elevated areas against the low land dwelling communities. Their self-styled superiority based on their claim of being enjoying safety against stealing and conflict with other communities, greenery of their land, fresh are and varieties of natural unaltered floral and faunal food resources which they believe are monitored by the ‘god’.

The Chenchus have their views about the origin of earth, flora, fauna and water bodies. They believe that all living beings animated and in animated things are created by *paramathmudu* also identified as *bagamanthudu*. Lord Vishnu incarnated as *varaha* (a wild boar) and brought up the globe-shape earth from the bottom of ocean and asked the goddess *rampalaganga* (the water goddess) to cut it by flowing through it, so that it can spread like mat on the water, for living beings to inhabit on. Since earth was sodden, all the water oozed out and flowed down when it was lifted from the ocean, and caused for formation of springs, streams and rivers. Some water living organisms were also lifted along with marshy and semi-solid form of earth, and they wallowed on it, and caused for *donalu* (ponds) and other water bodies.

The Chenchus believe that the forest is a space monitored by their ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings. These supernatural beings include deities, malevolent spirits like demons, evil spirits, and benevolent spirits, etc. They view that their ancestral spirits inhabit in the space surrounding their villages, and influence the living beings either in positive or negative senses. Therefore they propitiate their ancestral spirits to seek their benevolence and help. They view the forest as their home. They are very much familiar and feel safe in the forest. They sometimes say that as long as forest is dense and not damaged, so are our lives. Some informants utter the sentence with the author that we are safe till the forest is there. The

statements like this in the anthropological literature pertaining hunting and gathering are umpteen. In his classic study Colin Turnbull, observes that the Mbuti Pygmies of the Ituri Forest recognise their dependence on the forest by referring to it as 'Father' or 'Mother'. They do so 'because, as they say, it gives them food, warmth, shelter and clothing, just like their parents', and moreover, 'like their parents, [it] gives them affection' (Turnbull 1965: 19). And again, among the Nayaka, forest dwelling hunter-gatherers of Tamil Nadu, South India, Nurit Bird-David found a similar attitude: 'Nayaka look on the forest as they do on a mother or father. For them, it is not something "out there" that responds mechanically or passively but like a parent; it provides food unconditionally to its children' (Bird-David 1990: 190).

According to the Chenchus, Goddess Parvathi and Lord Shiva are parents of universe. Mother Goddess Parvathi had sown seeds of all varieties of flora and lord Shiva showered rains. Owing to the rain, some of the seeds sown on hilly areas were washed down and deposited in the low lands like river banks and valleys. Chenchu give justification for dense vegetation on the valley and river banks.

The Chenchus equate the actions of earth as living beings. They ascribe the human qualities to the earth. Guthrie (1993) says that the people tend to see the world anthropomorphically - we tend to attribute human motives, feelings, senses and other human characteristics to the living and non-living things that are not human. For example, we treat thunder is the voice of gods; clouds are the spirits of our ancestors. In Guthrie's view, this actually is a smart thing to do. If we think there are no human like things making things happen, then the consequences are costly. The Chenchus say that earth also has the character of growing and decline. The actions of termites and other worms linked to the growth of earth. Termites deposit mud in the form of ant-hills and generate the soil by eating and turning the wood. On the opposite form, due to the actions of rain, and wind the ant-hills and mud generated by termites get dissolved, which is linked with decay.

The Chenchus construct their culture around the forest. The meanings and practices derived from the immediate nature reflect in the attitudes of the Chenchus towards various beings and spaces in the forest. Forest is regarded as a space inhabited by the human and non-humans like plants, animals, and the human and non-human spirits. They have developed some regulations and disciplines to be observed in using certain spaces in the forest.

The Chenchus avoid traversing and hunting activities in certain areas in the forest. Places like *sela* (ravine) *vagu* (streams) *matta* (thick patches of forest) are avoided by the Chenchus, because they believe these are the resting places of wild animals and they should not be disturbed or killed at their lairs. But they kill the game, away from their lairs. Further, they believe such places are unsuitable for human entry because of presence of some divine plants which cause confusion or loss of cognizance or they may produce some mysterious sounds. For instance, Pacchipanlaka in Guttalachenu territory is the prohibited area because the Chenchus believe that, there are some creepers which kill the trespassers mysteriously.

3.2. Rainfall

About the rainfall the Chenchus hold the view that '*vaanadevatha*' (rain goddess) is the cause for rainfall. They draw the parallels between rain and forest as mother and child. By showering, the former mothers its child .i.e. forest. The Chenchus say that some special localities receive more rains than the other. For instance, hilly areas like *tekulapenta*, *kuntalabodu* in Palutal territory and *darabaily*, *revagani banda* in Nekkanti territory receive first and heavy rains and plain areas get rain latter.

The rainfall as per the Chenchus view is concomitance with the sanctity of certain sites and observation of ethics in daily life of the Chenchus. The places which are said to be the abodes of supernatural beings receive good rains. And the areas where people observe ethics, there the rainfall is regular and adequate. The ethics (*dharma*) is conceptualized by the Chenchus as: 1) observation of reciprocal sharing, 2) respecting elders and morals, 3) respecting the sanctity of sacred places, 4) revering and being innocuous towards the snakes like *dasari*

paamu/naamala paamu and *vaanakokila*. It is believed that, the places where these snakes reside, receive sufficient rains and are rich in vegetation. Chenchus believe that, certain sites are abodes of deities and they are revered as sacred. The following table -1 gives the details of some special and revered places in the forest of the sample settlements.

The Chenchus, about the rainfall, expressed their view that, these days the rainfall has gradually declined and the time of first showers of monsoon pushed back by one month from the end of May or early June to the early July and it is irregular too. As per the Chenchus the decline of rainfall is associated with: 1) large scale tree felling by the foreign agents and the ire of mother goddess and lord Shiva. It was originally goddess Parvathi and Lord Shiva who had sown and nurtured the forest, and they ordained that both humans and trers should live in harmony, protect and fend each other. On the contrary, now humans flouted the divine order and caused for large scale deforestation, which offended the deities, and deliberately they reduced the quantum of rainfall; 2) Failure of humans to adhere to the righteous compartment. The Chenchus use the phrase like *maanigulu soyam pattinaaru* – meaning human beings have become impertinent. This vanity resulted anger to the gods and now they are not much concerned about human beings and giving sufficient rainfall on right times.

Table-1: The sacred places that receive heavy rainfall in the sample settlements.

Sl.no	Settlement	Name of the place	Name of associated deity
1	Alatam	Gundam penta	Pothuraju
2	Chintala	Maddi gundam	Bayyanna
3	Guttalachenu	Palanka Sankella gundam Gadasaala serri	Veeraiah Devine cows and Daasari paamu Pothuraju
4	Marripalem	Jangala kona	Pothuraju
5	Nekkanti	Darabaily Tambella madugu	Bayyanna Naamala paamu, Peddamma
6	Palutla	Thota Kuntala bodu	Shiva lingam (idol of Shiva) Peddamma
7	Panthanala	Kamakshamma vaagu	Lingamaiah
8	Ponnlabailu	Challapidathala revu	Pothuraju

The problem of inadequate rainfall is addressed by negotiating with the goddess *Porlamma* – the village common deity. The Chenchus believe that, if they perform *pongubaalu* – communal rites of sacrifice – to the village deity, she will be appeased and in turn she will persuade *vaanadevatha* (goddess of rain) to bestow sufficient rains. All the Chenchu settlements have the specific sacred place for goddess *Porlamma* at the northeast boundary of the village. A stone-slab is erected as a symbol of goddess, under the big banyan or neem tree. During drought, all the households in the village will visit that place on the specified day; the idol of goddess is washed with stream water and decorated with turmeric and saffron. The village chief will break a coconut and he led a communal supplication to the goddess which is followed by the attendants in unison. The request goes like “*Oh mother! Our lives have become very difficult due to lack of rains. If we have committed any offence kindly pardon us. We are planning to desert this settlement in search of our food and water. Once we abandon this village, here no one will perform any ritual to you. If you want to be worshipped on this site, please let there be showers and retain us here*” then they read the indication of the goddess by observing the behaviour of the goat. If the goat quivers its body then it is coded as the acceptance of the goddess, and the goat is sacrificed. The sacred rice with jaggery and cooked meat is solemnly placed in front of the idol as oblation and the whole village will eat the food in a common banquet. It is believed that, there would be good rains in a couple of days. The Chenchus of Palutla and Guttalachenu settlements revealed cases of some real experiences of rainfall that occurred after this sort of communal worship.

3.3. Animal world in culture

As per the Chenchus’ perception both living organisms like human beings, plants and animals, and non-living organisms are created by the supreme god. The Chenchus see themselves as one of the organisms in the nature and never assume superior position to the animal or floral world. They constrain themselves by saying that ‘*manam advithobatu adavilone brathakalikaani adavimeeda adhikaaram cheyakuudadu*’ the true translation of these words is “we have to live with in the forest but we do not have control over the forest”. This statement is coherent with the arguments of Daniel Quinn. In a series of provocative novels, in *Ishmael* (1992) and then in *The Story of B* (1996), Daniel Quinn, argues, “that until about 10,000 years

ago humans co-existed with the planet in a way similar to other species. People used what they needed and no more. They did not accumulate possessions because they had to be on the move to harvest the fruits that the land provided and chase the game that supplemented their diet. He argues that we took a wrong step because we have constructed a myth in which people are the end of creation (patently not true, but one which we rarely question in our day-to-day thinking), and that we are meant to control all of creation since we are its apex. As our needs increase, we feel justified in continuing to increase our control over nature even when such control destroys the sustainability of those systems” (quoted from Moran op. cit.). This shows man is not superior to the other organisms in forest. The Chenchus view that the forest produce is to be shared by the human beings, animals and the supernatural beings.

The Chenchus see the close similarities between human and animal life. They believe every life-form possesses consciousness, which is common to both human and non- humans. Some behavioural patterns of some animals are analogous to human actions. For instance, when a wild dog dies, the pack assembles three times around the dead one, and each time with yelping. The last yelp is louder and lengthy to give the final farewell to the deceased dog. When a person dies, similarly the Chenchus gather and *tappeta* -a musical instrument- is beaten thrice. The Chenchus believe the grief in animal and human is similar and this is because both the human and animals have *jiv* (spirit or consciousness).

The antelopes lie in herd with their tails huddled together and their heads looking exterior in circular form. The Chenchus say these animals are very much cautious of the danger that is why they look outward for easy sniffing and spotting the predators. Birds build nests and perform voice imitation which is similar to the human actions and it requires great skill. It is matched with human activities. Such abilities are possible because the *jiv* is present in birds and animals too. Thus humans and animals are closely related and share some common characters.

The hunters and gatherers have belief systems regarding animals that, the animals too have wills like human beings. Chenchus believe that the goddess Maisamma will provide the

animals to the hunter. If goddess is not propitiated, she will alert the game that come in the way of hunter and which worsens his hunting trip. He will become an unsuccessful hunter. Sometimes such unsuccessful hunters will abstain from hunting for some period and again it will be resumed once he gets confident that goddess excused him. Sometimes even the hunting is seen as charity of the animal to offer food to the hunter. Such belief systems are predominant even in Cree community. The Waswanipi Cree of north-eastern Canada, according to Harvey Feit, 'say that they only catch an animal when the animal is given to them. They say that in winter the north wind, *chuetenshu*, and the animals themselves give them what they need to live' (Feit 1973: 116).

The Chenchus draw similarities between their life styles and that of some wild animals and birds. They say that before learning the hut building, their ancestors used to lead a pure nomadic life with no settlements but, resting under the shade of large trees and rocks. This is like a life of animals. They opined that their ancestors learnt the art of hut construction by closely observing the behaviour of wild boar which builds a small hut like resting place during breeding, by covering a shrub with thatching grass and cleaning the trash under it. It stays in hut for around one month till the pig lings are able to run as fast as their mother. In the early days, the Chenchus used to construct the same type of hut by covering bush or some low branches of trees with thatching grass or leaves. The Chenchus perceive the wild boar gave an idea of hut construction to their ancestors.

The rhythm of foraging time of the Chenchus is matched with that of birds. Both leave the resting place in the morning and return in the evening. There is a close comparison between the Chenchus' family system and that of the some birds. According to the informants, some birds like *erraburaka*, *gadapitta*, *garibichuka*, *gokiragadu*, *nallakeechugadu*, etc, lead a gregarious life but, each pair has its own nest and both birds sit on the eggs in turn and feed the young ones. Similarly, the Chenchus though live in group in settlement, each couple stays with the children in separate hut.

The Chenchus reported that the animals also have emotions, love and anger like human beings. The birds afore mentioned live in pairs. If anyone in the pair dies, the bereaved one will take the new mate and the new member will also feed the young ones. This is exactly similar with the marriage life of the Chenchus. There is remarriage system in the Chenchu society. Either after divorce or death of the spouse the bereaved one will take another partner. Generally, the Chenchus look after an orphan child, in the same fashion the gregarious birds *like kandileti pitta* and *pikkalavva* , feed the small orphan birds. This type of comportment was said to have been observed in Guttalachencu settlement.

There is a close similarity between the Chenchus and some birds and animals pertaining to seasonal nomadism. For instance, animals like *kondrigadu* (hyena), *edupandi* (hedgehog), *manupothu* (nilgai) *kondagorre* (wild sheep) stay some days at certain place and leave for other places in search of food. The ambush method of hunting of Chenchus has similarity with that of a snake called ‘*rallagotham*’. This snake coils itself and lurks beside some rocks or big stones, to pounce upon the approaching prey just as the Chenchus lurk in a bush or sneak over a *mancha* (raised pandal) to shoot the animal approaching to the water body or salt licks.

The Chenchus draw parallels between human and animal characters. If a person exhibits some peculiar behaviour, it is linked with some corresponding animal’s behaviour. For example, the fellow with large mouth is nicknamed as *kapparagadu* (a bird with big mouth); the lethargic person is called as *mattipinhara* or *rallagotham* (a snake which crawls sluggishly) ; the one with big eyes is called as *kundeligadu* (rabbit) more eloquent people are compared as *jillamaya pitta* (a bird which makes sounds frequently).

Some animals are treated as represents of deities. Tiger as goddess Peddamma, cheetah as Bayanna, bear as Pothurajhu, and wild dogs as divin dogs. Some birds are believed to have divine characters. For instance, *sompitta* (a small bird) is revered as foreteller of the Chenchus fate while moving in the forest. If this bird crosses across the path in front of the Chenchus and making unusual sounds, it is an indication that they will encounter some danger in the forest

which forces the Chenchus to cancel or postpone their trip. Hence, they respect the bird and they do never kill and eat that bird. If they meet any dead bird of such kind they bury it and maintain silence for a moment. The feathers or bones of *peddapakshi* or *jigipitta* are worn around the neck of the children to ward off the evil spirits.

4. Conclusions

Societies living in different natural settings will have a range of varied perceptions about their nature. The perceptions of a community are nurtured based on the raw material supplied to the human mind from the outside world and again the human mind will react and reflect on the natural surroundings, i.e. nature, in the form of various symbolic interactions. Blumer (1969) in his symbolic interaction theory claims that human beings act towards the things on the basis of meanings that the things have for them, and meanings of such things are derived or arise out of social interactions, and finally the meanings can be modified and manipulated.

Thus culture is seen as the mediator between the nature and human beings living in that nature. For instance, the small herb or creeper is a food or medicinal or magical source for a forest dweller but, the same object is seen differently by the timber merchant or an agriculturist. The behaviour of these individuals towards the herb differs. The former views it as the object of representation of magical force, hence, reveres and protects it, whereas the agriculturist perceives it as a weed in the crop and removes it.

If we consider that human activities are causes and solutions for the environmental degradation and we intend to change the attitudes and activities of the given human group towards the environment in order to sustain it, then we need to understand the cultural layer through which such group is interacting with the nature that encircles the group.

As long as we hold single perception that the forest or nature is the aggregation of trees or the source of income generation, it cannot accommodate the comprehensive views of multiple societies, and the possibility of alteration of the human activities is very feeble. It is an imperative to acknowledge that there is no single environment and single notion of nature, as

there is no single human culture. Therefore, the environmental discourses and policies are to accommodate the concept of multiple natures, and to be culture friendly.

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