

CHENCHU TRIBE

The **Chenchus** are a Dravidian tribe, a designated Scheduled Tribe in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Odisha. They are an aboriginal tribe whose traditional way of life been based on hunting and gathering. The Chenchus speak the Chenchu language, a member of the Dravidian language family. In general, the Chenchu relationship to non-tribal people has been largely symbiotic. Some Chenchus have continued to specialize in collecting forest products for sale to non-tribal people. Many Chenchus live in the sparse and deciduous Nallamala forest of Andhra Pradesh.

The Chenchus are referred to as one of the Primitive Tribal Groups that are still dependent on forests and do not cultivate land but hunt for a living. Non-tribe people living among them rent land from the Chenchus and pay a portion of the harvest. Other people also settled among them with the help of the Chenchus and learned agriculture from them, and the nomadic Banjara herders who graze their cattle in the forest also have been allotted land there. The Chenchus have responded unenthusiastically to government efforts to induce them to take up agriculture themselves.



Chenchus are of short and slender stature with very dark skin, wavy or curly hair, broad faces, flat noses, and a trace of prognathism. Though no longer dressing in leaves like their ancestors, of whom the seventeenth-century Muslim chronicler

Ferishta gave a poignant description, they normally wear but the scantiest dress: the men small aprons suspended from a fibre or leather belt, the end drawn in between the legs, and the women cotton bodices and a length of sari-cloth wound round their hips. There is no people in India poorer in material possessions than the Jungle Chenchus; bows and arrows, a knife, an axe, a digging stick, some pots and baskets, and a few tattered rags constitute many a Chenchu's entire belongings. He usually owns a thatched hut in one of the small settlements where he lives during the monsoon rains and in the cold weather. But in the hot season communities split up and individual family groups camp in the open, under overhanging rocks or in temporary leaf-shelters.

The basic unit of Chenchu society is the nuclear family, consisting of a man, his wife, and their children. For all practical purposes husband and wife are partners with equal rights, and this equality of status means that the family may live with either the husband's or the wife's tribal group. Each such group holds hereditary rights to a tract of land, and within its boundaries its members are free to hunt and collect edible roots and tubers. These used to be the Chenchus' staple food, though we shall see that in recent years there has been a change in their diet and ways of subsistence.

The Chenchus are characterized by a strong sense of independence and personal freedom. None of them feels bound to any particular locality, and the ability to move from one group to the other allows men and women to choose the companions with whom they wish to share their daily lives. Marriage rules are based on the exogamy of patrilineal clans. As long as they observe the rules of clan exogamy young people are free to marry whomsoever they wish. Spouses can separate without any formality, but the abduction of a woman still living with her husband is disapproved of as immoral.

In the sphere of religion the Chenchus evince certain characteristic traits which distinguish them from the surrounding Hindu peasantry. Though they worship some of the deities prominent in the cult of Telugu villagers, they accord much greater importance to a powerful goddess who has control