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COLONIAL MODERNITY AND TRIBES: A STUDY ON THE CHENCHUS OF ANDHRA (1880-1920)

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ABSTRACT

History of forest based labour, mainly performed by tribes, and did not receive sufficient attention of historians of India. In order to address this conceptual gap, this paper documents the history of Chenchu labour during the period 1880-1920. The main objective of this paper is to explore the pattern of interaction that took place between the British rule and tribes in South India with a particular reference Chenchus of Andhra region which is Telugu language speaking region of Madras Presidency. By focusing on British records, this paper documents the way the British extracted forest resources with the labour of Chenchus and implication of such process. The main proposition of this paper is that the British tapped the labour of Chenchus by the way of providing them employment and other welfare schemes. By so doing, the resources and labour systematically tapped for the best advancement of the British.

KEYWORDS: *Andhra, British, Chenchu labour, Nallamala, Tribe*

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the colonial economic process, which was essentially extractive in nature, has generated a massive demand for forest resources. This requirement compelled the British to acquire monopolistic control of the British over forests resources. This control was consolidated with legal and administrative policies that were promulgated during the period of 1860-1890. This policy formulation resulted in extension of control of the state over most of the forests in which tribal communities live. Besides this, sustained extraction of forest resources required a labour force which is well adapted to local conditions and having better understanding on forest resource tapping. It was this situation that fashioned the policies of the British towards tribes. The Chenchus were gradually brought under labor force to be employed by forest department in various conservation works. The essential objective of this study is to captures the history of Chenchu labour in Madras Presidency with a particular focus on Andhra region.

THE CHENCHUS- A BRIEF PROFILE

The Chenchus were predominately the Telugu language speaking forest tribe of Nallamala hills of Andhra Pradesh and Telanganastates. Demographically they are found in the districts of Kurnool, Guntur, Prakasam, Nalgonda, Mahaboobnagar etc. Due to backwardness, the Government of India has declared 'Chenchu' as one of the primitive tribes out of the 75 Tribes declared as 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups' (PVTGs). The process of integrating the Chenchus into modern state apparatus was initiated by the British. Predominantly, the Chenchus were used as labour force in plantation works under the supervision of Forest Department. Through the policy of plantation works in Nallamala hills the Chenchus were drawn into the process of forest based labour.

The main assumption of this study is that the autonomy of Chenchus tribes and their livelihood which dependent upon forest resources were gradually destroyed by the British interventions in management of forests. It was this process that transformed Chenchus from children of jungle to forest labour. This transformation resulted in acute poverty and underdevelopment for Chenchus in independent India. This process, in fact, resulted in a hostile relationship between the British and Chenchus for a long period of time.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHENCHUS

In the official and ethnographical discourse of the British the Chenchus were represented as wild tribes exists in forest of south India. Francis Buchanan, employed by the British as surveyor (1807), mentioned in his writings about Chenchus. He describes that a tribe called ChensuCarir or Cat' Chensu or Cad 'Eriliguru or Chensu lives in the jungles of Madras. The Present Chenchu name could be traced in Kurnool manual of 1886. It mentions that 'A

wild tribe called Chenchus inhabit the Nallamala Hills and called themselves as 'Adi Chenchus'ⁱ. In this manual, Chenchus shown as wild and violent tribes often indulged in crimes.ⁱⁱ In the Cuddapah Manual of 1875, the 'Chenchuwars' classified under the criminal classes. In the census report of 1891 Chenchu was mentioned as a subdivision of Yanadis.ⁱⁱⁱ Thurston and Rangachari (1909) describe "The Chenchus or Chentsus are a Telugu speaking jungle tribe inhabiting the hills of the Kurnool and Nellore districts"^{iv}. In 1921 the pamphlet "The Chenchus and the Madras police" described about the Chenchus as a wild tribe of the Madras forests.^v

Several ethnographic studies mentions about the Chenchus which happens to be an important tribe. The noted ethnographer, Haimendorf (1943) describes his ideas about the Chenchus about their social life, beliefs and traditions and economic life in the Nizam dominion and in Madras Presidency.^{vi} An ethnographer, employed by the Government of Madras, Aiyappan (1948) describes the name 'Chenchu' meaning forelocks. 'ChunchuVaru' will apply to people with unbraided and grisly forelocks. The ecological meaning is sought to be attributed to the word 'Chenchu' by interpreting that a person who lives under a chettu (tree) is a Chenchu.^{vii}

Ethnographic studies carried out in South India during post-colonial period continued to describe about the Chenchus. According to Fuchs (1977) the Chenchus to have exogamous set which however, do not seem to be of totemic origin. Nor do the Chenchus observe any totemic food taboos. The greater part of them has now settled down in the plain villages, either as farmers or as farm labourers.^{viii} Haimendorf (1982) his observations on tribal society he given the ethnographic scene of Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh "In their physical make-up the Chenchus conform largely to a racial type described by anthropologists as veddoid, a term derived from the veddas, a primitive tribe of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Like the Veddas, the Chenchus are of short and slender stature with very dark skin, wavy or curly hair, broad faces, flat noses, and a trace of progranthism."^{ix} Bhowmick (1992) he used the word on the Chenchus as 'contemporary primitives' the Chenchus of Andhra Pradesh. The author documented how the Chenchus transition happened from pre-Agricultural level to towards development. The Chenchus division likes Konda Chenchus, Uru Chenchus, Yanadi Chenchus, Bontha Chenchus, Chenchu Dasaries, Koya Chenchus, and Krishna Chenchus.^x

THE CHENCHUS AS A LABOR FORCE

Penetration of modern state along with government apparatus took place during the British colonial rule. The establishment of forest conservancy in 1860 led to a restriction of their privileges within the forest. The Chenchus turned to small-time banditry, and the police were quickly deluged with reports of crimes like deliberate shooting at forests and stealing and robbing people. To keep the Chenchus under control, several strategies were used. The Chenchus were given permission to use all forest products for both personal use and commercial gain. They may

also freely hunt, fish, and graze a restricted number of sheep, goats, and cattle. In 1883–1884, the Chenchus were significantly indebted to the merchants, so the forest department took over the collection of minor forest produce and used Chenchu labor for this purpose. The goal was to exclude these merchants. However, the Scheme proved to be ineffective, and between 1897 and 1898, the Chenchus abandoned this approach and went back to their previous practice of autonomously selling the small forest produce to merchants.^{xi}

The British government's approach to Chenchus was shaped by their sensitivity to forcing tribes to settle down and engage in agriculture. A specific quantity of land was set aside near the towns for agricultural use, and programs were developed to persuade the Chenchus to begin farming in order to implement this policy. Large-scale plantation operations were started at great financial risk in an effort to provide the Chenchus something to do later, between 1905 and 1914. But eventually, these proved to be unprofitable and had to be abandoned. As a result of the subsequent joblessness, Chenchu crime escalated even further, primarily involving the theft of neighboring cultivators' harvests. Forest regulations that have eliminated the Chenchus' traditional reliance on forest resources are what led to their engagement, either directly or indirectly.

Because of the rise in criminality, the British realized how important it was to tame the Chenchus. The Chenchus were given special attention in 1917 and were given a two-year investigation period. After that, the district forest officer in Kurnool West took on the role of special Chenchu officer, and three other people were appointed: an assistant Chenchu officer, a Chenchus assistant surgeon, and an education superintendent. Despite these administrative precautions, there was still a rise in Chenchu criminality in 1919. As a result, the forest department started to operate emergency coupes close to the major communities and hired Chenchus for felling work. Nevertheless, this program proved to be unprofitable and detrimental to the forest, and in 1925 it was abandoned in favor of leasing bamboo coupes to contractors who were required to exploit Chenchu labor.^{xii}

The forest department, as we have seen, provides most of the employment of the Chenchus. Every morning there is a kind of roll-call and those men who are inclined to work are given their task for the day. Work for the department is paid at As. 5 per day, of which As.4 is usually paid in millet at a fixed rate and A.1 in cash. On the other hand, if the Chenchus do piece-work for contractors they earn as much as As. 8 or As. 12 per day, and a rule highly beneficial to the Chenchus forbids contractors to employ outside labour as long as Chenchu labour is available.^{xiii} However, it seems that Chenchus, even when well paid, seldom work consistently, but only do just as much as will provide them with immediate food and other bare necessities.

In the due course of time, the system of leasing minor forest produce to contractors has been replaced by co-operative societies, which arrange for both collection and disposal. These societies, of which all Chenchus of

the respective settlements are members have been started on a sound basis by a government advance of Rs. 10000. They buy the forest produce from the Chenchus at fixed prices, sell them in the open market, and divide any surplus among the members. Thus the profits which formerly fell to the contractors now go to the Chenchus.

Chenchus in forest works like teak and bamboo works- Employment of Chenchus on forest works in Kurnool district. The employment of Chentsus in the work of bamboo splitting is awaited. They were mainly employed in working of bamboo coupes. Chenchus are employed in both bamboo and fuel coupes. Contractors employ gangs of coolies in the instance for felling and sorting the timber or bamboos. Contractors or his agent issues the required C – form permit or permits for removal of the timber or bamboos purchased .one of the conditions of the agreement (clause 12) with all contractors is that shall first employ Chentsus or ----other persons in settlements inside the forest as at Chelama for doing their felling work. Chenchus do not in all cases however seek employment for felling work under the contractors because they complain of the work being too hard for them.The staff of chentsu fire patrols engaged throughout the year Special departmental coupes to be worked by Chentsusarerequired.RegardingChentsus of Bamboo work. Chenchus and Bamboo work. To start work of felling bamboos in the unleased out area of the division, in order that the Chenchus might have some definite work to go on with after all the fire lines are cut and burnt.

One officer is telling that to learn the bamboo splitting knows this work thoroughly.It is proposed to spend the marginally noted amount for collection of bamboos departmentally through the agency of Chenchus during 1918-1919.Report from Messrs. Madan and Saunders in regard to the employment of Chenchus in the work of Bamboo splitting in west Kurnool.Mr. Madan submitted a lengthy report showing how he proposed to provide work for the Chenchus in Kurnool west district – In this report he provides for work for the Chenchus Gudems at Pecheruvu, Indreshwaram, Nagaluti,Bairluti,Pasurutla,Sudem, and Honkaram (Dulalapenta).The work consists of felling and splitting bamboos in nine series.

To ascertain work has been provided for the Chenchus in cutting bamboos since January 1918.Scheme for the Departmental collection of bamboos by the Chenchus of Pecheruvu ,Indreswaram ,Nagaluti , Bairluti , Pasurulta ,Rudracode ,Pangidi ,Sudem and Honkaram (now mostly stopping at Dulalapenta)But as far as possible care had been taken to see that in coupe there may be sufficient bamboos available to keep the Chenchus going ---for at least 6 months in the year.The greater portion of the area where bamboos are available is above Woods line and not in the portion below this line which is known as the Terai Forest and for which alone working plan has been sanctioned in the Nallamalais(N.B. the only exception is Gundlabrahmeswaram working plan but there are no Chenchus living in this area)- sanction bamboo felling scheme .

The scheme to be a permanent success a number of hill roads will have to be constructed for the conveying the bamboo collected by the Chenchus on hill slopes and on plateau above the hills. Thus for example the country drained by the Munimaduguleru beyond the Nagauti hills, densely covered with bamboos. If this area is to be properly worked we must open it up by a ghat road leading in the direction of the main market towards Atmakur and Venkatapuram. This is first cart track I am taking up as it will not only be of use for Nagultigudem, but will also enable us to realise full value for bamboos collected in Pecheruvu Range. Extra revenue it will fetch from bamboos, minor forest produce, etc

All the Bamboos collection has been started. For 1918-1919 I propose to spend at least 10,500 rupees on this work. At an auction sale held by me on 1-4-18, I was able to secure 2 contractors who between them have paid about Rs4, 200 merely for the monopoly right to purchase at fixed rates all bamboos collected by the Chenchus. At Nagaluti in the Atmakur range 50 Chenchus are being employed and at Bairluti a similar number are employed. At each of these gudems is a Deputy ranger in charge. The work is similar to that at Pecheruvu and the Deputy Ranger supervises the work all day long.

At Rudracodu, Passetla and Pangidi similar work has been ---commenced but the Chenchus are only just commencing to come back from guarding the fields for which they get a small amount monthly. Not being in the Velgode range at present I cannot exactly say now many will be available for regular work when they have settled down. Probably 25 at each of these gudems will be the number available. As regards the employment of Chenchus as fire patrols etc., ten are being employed from five gudems as fire patrols and 12 as fire watchers in connection with the fire protection scheme sanctioned for the Nandyal and Valgode ranges. Next year more will be employed as the scheme is extended to Atmakur and Sirvel ranges next year and the year after.

Protection of forests from fire without the control which can only be obtained by employment of wild jungle tribes who have hitherto been entirely uncontrolled life in the forest is practically impossible. By employment and proper treatment we can make these people into fairly decent members of the general community and I Sincerely hope that the works which have had such a good start may continue until, with the employment of Chenchus, regular fire protection and cooperation of revenue and forest officers for the prevention of firing by grazers we have got rid of fires in the Nallamalais forests for good.

Chenchus Works for the forest department –

1. Collection of minor forest produce
2. Work on plantations
3. Line cutting, clearing and burning.

4. General cooly work – pathamaking, fencing, etc.
5. Fire patrols.

Relations with Forest department: In 1891 a notification under section 16 of the Madras Forest was published. This allowed to the Chentsus the right to collect for their own use and also independently recognized a non-exclusive right to collect for sale or barter certain specified minor produce subject to regulation by the government, and until 1895 such produce was collected, as it had been previously by the Chentsus and sold by them to the villagers. In 1895 the right was leased out under the conditions among others not concerned with the Chenchus, that Chenchu labour should be used as far as possible and that collection by Chentsus for their own consumption should not interfered with. This of course caused much discontent among the Chentsus and in 1899 another gazette notification left the collection and disposal entirely to the Chentsus on the condition that they should keep the forest free from fires. The result of this was most unsatisfactory. The forest was burnt from end to end and the Chentsus were perpetually going to the village: they were in the hands of the sowears, loans were repaid in forest produce and the amount of license allowed to the Chentsus naturally facilitated the commission of offensive in and of the forest. This arrangement continued till 1905.

Other forest works - Nature of activities – cutting, watering etc. – plantation work is as already stated at an end. There are also works such as splitting bamboos, making baskets, fences etc. on which Chentsus can be employed , but their employment from an economic point of view has the disadvantage of being expensive and their disinclination to submit to any kind of control makes the results uncertain. The results must depend on supervision.

EMPLOYMENT OF CHENCHUS PLANTATION FORESTS MANAGEMENT

Estimate for the employment of Chenchus in the Nallamalais. It is agreed that it is desirable to give employment as much as possible to the Chenchus in the forests so as to get them under control and to convert them from half-starved mischievous community into useful people who will look upon the preservation and protection of forest as an object of supreme interest to themselves. In order to bring them to this state it is proposed to employ certain number of them at certain centres of perennial water -1) on plantations works i.e., in digging pits for seeds ,sowing the seeds and watering the seedling and maintaining the fencing or weeding and creeper-cutting 2) other on fire protection work, 3) bamboo cutting .The women will be given the work of collection of minor produce and seeds.

In considering the employment of the Chenchus and gaining their good will which probably means in the near future taken together with fire protection the cessation of fires in the forests the sum total of result must be

considered besides the direct gain of so many hundred acres of assured plantation per annum. The minimum rates of wages in the Nallmalais is 4 annas per day for ordinary villagers who by working longer hours at piece work can get 5-6 annas. In order that each man may get three measures of cholam besides some salt, chillies or tobacco it is proposed to fix the rate of remuneration at As 3-6 per day, and steps will be taken to obtain cholam at normal rates in large quantities. The As 3-6 will be paid in cash and shops with Rs. 500 worth of stock will be opened at each centre; so each man can purchase what he pleases. The money to be spent on the stock for the shops is included in the estimate but the equivalent value will always be in land.

The forest department, as we have seen, provide most of the employment of the Chenchus; every morning there is a kind of roll-call and those men who are inclined to work are given their task for the day. Work for the department is paid at As. 5 per day, of which As.4 are usually paid in millet at a fixed rate and A.1 in cash. On the other hand if the Chenchus do piece-work for contractors they earn as much as As. 8 or As. 12 per day, and a rule highly beneficial to the Chenchus forbids contractors to employ outside labour as long as Chenchu labour is available^{xiv}. However, it seems that Chenchus, even when well paid, seldom work consistently, but only do just as much as will provide them with immediate food and other bare necessities; once a man has earned a small amount, he takes a rest until the money is expended and he is forced to resume work.^{xv}

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the process of making of tribal labour by focusing the Chenchus by the British. The mechanism of controlling tribes by the way of extracting resources and labour, this paper highlights. It has been documented that the relationship between the British and tribes operated within the framework of exploitative relationship. Even though certain reforms are introduced but the main objective of the British is to tapping the labour of tribe for its economic needs.

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