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## FOOD GATHERING TECHNIQUES AND TRADITIONS OF THE CHENCHUS IN NALLAMALA FOREST

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The Chenchus, identified as a Primitive tribe by the Government of India, live mainly in the Nallamala Forest, which is part of the state of Andhra Pradesh. The one thing that distinguishes the 'Chenchu' and from the civilized society and that brings them a special recognition is their unique culture. It is very interesting and surprising to find that their unique culture has such mal traditions and misbeliefs that hinder development yet it flourishes with such well-defined and good practices rich moral values ought to be followed by the modern civilized society. In this unit the food habits of the Chenchus, how they collect the food, their livelihood, tools, and materials they use, their relations, festivals, celebrations, customs and traditions they follow, their education system, how they treat ailments etc., will be discussed here under.

### Food Habits of the Chenchus

Food is the major aspect in the culture of the Chenchus. They completely depend on the forests for food. They like taking Non – Vegetarian food for which they hunt in the forests. At the time there is no hunting possible they take fruits, roots, bulbs, tubers, foliage of different trees as their food. But there have been many changes in the food habits of the Chenchus over a decade. The having been dependent on the non-vegetarian food once to meet their food requirements, the Chenchus now give due importance to the non-vegetarian food as well. The following list shows various combinations of non-veg foods that they like most.

1. *Korra buvva – Kodi thunakalu* (Fox tail millet rice – pieces of chicken)
2. *Korra buvva – Ulava charu* (Fox tail millet rice with the soup made of horse gram)
3. *Jonna Annam – Chintha thokku* (Sorghum rice with tamarind chutney)
4. *Sajja Annam – Chintha thokku* (Pearl millet rice with tamarind chutney)
5. *Thiyati perugu – Raagi Sankati* (Sweet yogurt with sorghum millet ball)
6. *Arike annam – Pappu chaaru – barry neyye* ( Kodo millet rice with dal and Buffalo ghee)
7. *Sanna Chepalu – Raagi rotte* (Small fish curry with sorghum bread)
8. *Varige buvva – Chintha thokku* (Proso millet rice with tamarind chutney)
9. *Sajja buvva – Majjiga* (Peral millet rice with buttermilk)
10. *Raagi sankati – Kudeti kura* (Sorghum millet ball with Rabbit Curry)

The forecited varieties of non-veg foods are not available to them throughout the year. In such cases, they prepare their food with roots and leaves that they get from forests. In even more dine situations, they burn wood to ashes which they mix with tamarind and take as the food.



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Even though the Chenchus take different types of food, it is a bitter fact that they are suffering from malnutrition. So, the Government Departments like ITDA (Integrated Tribal Development Agency) and ICDS (Integrated Child Development Service) are providing nutritious food to the Children and Women of the Chenchus through Anganwadi Centers. Further the rice distributed under the 'National Food for Work Program' scheme has become the staple food for the Chenchus.

Some of the bulbs, tubers, corms and mushrooms that they eat Chenchus are Poisonous. It is generally difficult for common folk to identify them. Sometimes the major food grains for the Chenchus. They even cultivate the vegetables such as Tomato's

, Brinjal, Beans, Chili, Bitter guard etc., in their yards. They make soup with rice. And also, they use Bamboo rice to eat.

Having accustomed to the ways of the civilized society, there are changes in the meal taking timings of the Chenchus as well. Earlier they used to take their first meal before going to forest and when they returned home the evening, they took their second meal before going to bed. But now they take their breakfast in the morning, lunch in the afternoon, snacks in the evening and dinner at night.

## Drinks

The Chenchus who have cattle usually take goat milk and buffalo milk. But now as a result of their mingling with civilized people they are taking Tea and Coffee as well. The staple alcoholic drink of the Chenchus is the arrack make from *Mahua* flowers. They themselves prepare this arrack by fermenting *Mahua* flowers, Mesquite tree bark and jaggery. However, the Chenchus who visit towns and cities for work are tasting foreign liquor. Apart from these the Chenchus are smoking beedis, Cigarettes and chewing tobacco products.

## Food collection of the Chenchus

Whereas the civilized society is in the stage of food Production and Processing, the Chenchus, the forest dwellers are still in the stage of food collection. They never think of preserving food for tomorrow. They search for food on daily basis. Unlike the civilized society, they never store food grains for future or preserve food for tomorrow. One of the reasons for this their food collection depends on the resources available in the forest in different seasons in different times

## Hunting

Except for the Tiger, the Cheetah and the fox, the Chenchus hunt and eat the rest of the wildlife. Monkey is one of the animals that could not be hunted eaten as per the Indian society. But the Chenchus are the voracious eaters of the flesh of monkeys and lion tailed monkeys. During the rainy season in the Nallamala forests., the meadows grow richly with of a lush of juicy green grass offering plenty of food for animals to grow strong and stout. So, this is the most feasible time for the Chenchus to hunting. They hunt antelopes, chital deer, *Kadathi* and *Nilgai* (different species of deer) and eat them. During the summer and autumn season they hunt birds, monkeys and lion-tailed monkeys for the rest of the year, they hunt Rabbits, Tortoises, Indian giant Squirrels, wild boars, Indian Porcupines, Winged white Ants, Jungle fowls etc.,





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The season from March to June is the best time for the Chenchus to go for hunting. The numbers of Persons to go for hunting is decided by the type of animal they are going for. If they want to catch a Rabbit or a Tortoise or a jungle fowl or Squirrel or fish, usually two people mostly wife and husband go. In case they want to hunt a wild boar or a bear, or a *Kadithi* or a Monitor Lizard, a chital deer or a jungle cat etc., 4 to 6 people go together. Among them one is the head or Chief bowmen. Two are to trap and divert the prey and one or two more bowmen for if one Bowman misses the target. The other would take the chance. Two men would skin the animal and share the flesh among the members equitably. Thus, every member who takes part in hunting plays his role efficiently. Their number is always even for equal distribution of meat. However, the bowmen whose arrow struck the prey gets 1 part extra and one more part is spared for the head of their Gudem (dwelling) or for the person who devised the plan.

### Role of Dogs in Hunting

The Chenchus take dogs along with them when they go for hunting. The Dogs play a crucial role in the Process. For their safety and sensing the existence of dangerous and ferocious animals in the vicinity. The dogs are quite useful to the Chenchus. With their remarkable ability in smelling and sniffing, the dogs sense the presence of venomous snakes. Thus, they warn their masters and protect them from the danger of being bitten by snakes. Once any animal that is shot and wounded escapes, the dogs chase it and show their masters its whereabouts while hunting. In case the escaped animals are small like Rabbits and birds like cranes etc., they catch them in mouth and bring them back to their masters.

In order to see the sniffing ability of the dogs more effective in hunting, the Chenchus give them some kind of juices made of some leaves and herbs. On a Sunday, the Chenchus collect fibre and roots from '*Gadaring Tree*' and '*Turvola*' (Indigenous plant species). They grind that fibre and roots well, then add the legs and tail of Monitor Lizard again they whet them well to make balls. The night before the day they go for hunting, the Chenchus do not feed their dogs and make them starve. The next morning, they give the dogs *the guana tree* mixture balls and the dogs that have been starving since the previous night swallow those mixture balls, the Chenchus feed them with cooked rice. Throughout the day they feed the dogs sumptuously with *conjee*, porridge and malt but avoid sour taste. Hence the dogs which have taken the '*Guana Tree*' medicine will be remarkably effective in smelling, sniffing and sensing existence when gone for hunting.

However, not all the dogs can help the Chenchus in hunting. Only a few dogs are specially trained for the purpose. Apart from giving the *guana tree* medicine to the dogs, the Chenchus also make them have the eggs of '*Kannerevudu*' bird, i.e., Plover bird. Because of which like that bird, the dogs do not sleep at night and they are vigilant as well. The dogs are not only used for hunting by the Chenchus but also for collecting jungle products. At times, the Chenchus have to stay back in the forest for days and weeks. Then their dogs are their best companions.

### Models of Hunting

The Chenchus adopt three models of hunting. The hunters share the meat among themselves if they hunt smaller animals. If they hunt bigger ones, the meat is shared among all the folks in the hamlet.



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## Implements used in Hunting

1. Stones, 2. Wood pieces in the form of clubs, 3. Bow and arrow, 4. Caterpillar, 5. Axe and digging stick.

## Techniques

- (a) Ambush, (b) Trap, (c) Surrounding the animal by all sides.

Ambush is a common technique used in hunting. The Chenchu way lay at certain spots like salt-lick or water holes, and wait for the animals by releasing the arrow.

Three types of traps are used. The first one is arranged too, flexible but considerably strong branch of a tree by bending it the ground which is knoched with one end of the rope. The other end of the rope is arranged into a trap. Some food stuff is kept in the trap and when the animal like here try to eat it, the system gets disturbed and the rope get tightened around the neck and the tree branch goes back to its original position killing the animal.

Another method of trap is to arrange a considerably bigger more or less flat stone on the ground with one of its side is being supported by bamboo splinters so that one end of the stone is lifted up. To the supporter another splinter is fixed up in such a fashion that even the a lightest disturbance would cause the supporter to slip allowing the stone to fall. To this second splinter some food material is attached. It is used mainly to kill rats.

The third trap is to arrange thorny and prickly bushes in two lines, in a cone fashion. The narrowing end leads int a deep pit. The hares and rabbits are driven from the wider end so that they come and fall in the pit.

The third technique is rather systematic way of approaching the animal from all the sides. This technique is used to hunt gin game like deer, porcupine, wild boar, wild goat, etc. the technique is more savage in its outlook where people use all kinds of tactics in attempted at the animal. Generally, eight ten people were involved in this operation.

The food – quest is a total family effort with a division of labor between the men who hunt and the women and children who bring in more easily collected edibles. Usually, it is also an effort involving more than one family because it is more efficient for several men to hunt together than for one more man to hunt alone.

Hunting by stalking is the common method adopted by the Chenchu. Success in stalking depends not only on skills in handling weapon but also on an intimate knowledge of animal's habits which are species-specific. All animals of a species given variations in sex and age and whether or not they are in rut, may usually be counted on to behave in the same general way. During British regime the police used Chenchus for tracking criminals. This knowledge he acquired probably, from his art of stalking after animals.

An expert Chenchu can predict more or less correctly, the age, sex, weight of animal by seeing its strides of fecal matter or by smelling urine. They know the tracks of animal and by following it he tries to find some other evidence like fecal matter or urine. He can tell how fresh the tracks are. One he finds a reasonably free set of tracks; he meekly follows it until he reaches the animal within sight. The principle involves is that unless it knows it is sees it, he alerts himself not to commit even a single mistake and try to approach the animal from downwind, by creping's from bush to bush or rock to rock. At times he standstills without





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even working eyes for several minutes, till the animal sleepishly comes to him mistaking that it is an interesting object to lick. Another person may also approach it in another direction. When they reach the animal at a shooting distance, a person releases the arrow so that the animal reacts as if it were being attacked from in-front of it and then runs towards the hunter who will cast an arrow at its lethal part. In such circumstance if there were several other people who are hiding at convenient places may also attack with clubs or arrows or stones and one or two people may pounce upon it. The dogs chase the animal and do not allow it to escape. Sometimes drums are beaten in order to make the animal's berserk so that the people hiding in convenient positions can shoot animals.

All the above kills are very important but shooting the animal in its most vulnerable part is considered to be most crucial and skillful and that is why some extra credit is bestowed on marksmanship and marksman. Hunting is restricted to only one's territory and trespassing into others territory is deemed scornfully. Generally, the Chenchus confine their hunting arena to their own territory.

But during stalking, an animal enters others territory also. In such cases the hunter can follow it and hunt. And he can give some amount of meat to the eldest person of the group to which the territory belongs. Or he can give to any other person in that group with whom the hunter has relationship either through blood, affinity, skill and activity. Sometimes during big game hunting one or two persons from adjacent territories are invited to join one's group.

## Skills

From the above description it appears that hunting doesn't require much skill. But in fact, it is only a superficial overview. In general, there are two methods of hunting: one by using most effective techniques and tools like arranging traps, or using gum, the other one is by using mental faculty and shrewdness in the absence of complex technology, an expert Chenchu hunter is very much shrewd in locating the animal, capable of beguiling it by stalking silently. He is also an expert animal psychologist and ethnologist and knows the animal bionomics. He can identify the animal either from its foot prints or fecal matter. He knows the animal food habits, mating seasons and aggression periods.

This knowledge not only facilitates him in the successful hunt but also prevents him from meeting dangerous animals like tiger, panther and bear. In contingent situations like a snake-bite, he knows what medicine is to be taken. All the more he knows the vulnerable parts of the animal body shooting at which he can paralyze the animal. There were only few people in each village with all the above qualities. However, many people hunt with some limited knowledge and this is the major factor which forces people with different skills to come together to make out a hunting party.

## Some more important points about the Chenchus Hunting

The Chenchus consider the tiger their eldest son. They do not have much fear of a tiger. They are quite aware of grounds where tigers roam in the jungle and the growls of pain when they are hurt.

Many times, when a tiger kills a deer or a stag or a sheep, eats the soft flesh of its prey, drinks its blood, then goes to have a drink of water, then the Chenchus kindle a fire around the carcass of the prey so that the tiger does not come back again. The next day, with help of



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their habitants, The Chenchus take away the carcass home and share the meat among them. In case, the mother tigress hunts an animal, The Chenchus don't touch the meat thinking that it will be sufficient for tis cubs.

2. If at all The Chenchus are injured either during hunting or by any wild animal, which is mostly by a bear. They eat the meat of a bear that is died of any reason or killed by a tiger. However, it is very hand to cut the meat of a bear into pieces and to cook it well.

When the bear meat is cooked, the pieces of meat are served first to a well-fed gentleman of their community. The reason behind it is that the bear meat is very tough and hard. If it is served first an amateur eater, he may eat two to three pieces of hard meat with great difficulty, drinks water and leave the rest. Watching this, children and others cannot eat the bear meat. That is why the bear meat is first served to such an expert and well-fed gentleman so that children can learn how to eat bear meat and also the meat do not go wasted.

3. Once the animal that is hurt with arrows shot by the Chenchus is caught by an old tiger or a mother tigress, The Chenchus leave the animal for the tiger. Thinking that the old tiger can't hunt or as a taken of their gratitude for they had taken away the meat of animals killed by tiger before. They also think that the mother tigress got food that day because of them.

4. Sometimes, the Chenchus fall in danger because of snakes. When they are for hunting. When a big snake wants to mate, it makes a whistle sound for a partner and if any other big snake is nearby, it also gives out whistle sound in return. Then they mate with each other. If it all a man mistakes that whistle sound for another man and goes that way, he is endangered for sure. The snake coils him in no time. Sometimes the dogs of The Chenchus fall prey to a python on hearing their cries, The Chenchus go there kill the python and save the dogs.

Often The Chenchus get the dead animals killed by a big snake, cook and eat them. While cooking they remove the gum like substance formed by the snake bite with a knife. Later, they burn the carcass well, unskin it. Thus, the meat is separated, cooked well and eaten. They even take away the meat of a dead animal bitten by a poisonous snake. They say that if the meat is burnt well, its poisonous effect will be died out.

### Livelihood of the Chenchus

In the olden days the Chenchus used to get *Mirasi* tax from the pilgrims of Srisailam shrine. But later the Government cancelled it. As a result, The Chenchus chose collecting forest products apart from hunting for their livelihood. Mainly they collect honey, resin, *mahua* flowers and bamboo and wood with which they make furniture. However, they get more income from honey only.

### Collecting Honey

The Chenchus are experts in collecting honey. It is said that the process of collecting honey is far more difficult than the process of hunting. They strictly follow their community commitments while collecting honey. It is a very long process and surely not a one-day task. It takes two to three weeks for them to collect honey.





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## Collecting Gum or Glue

Next to honey, gum or glue is the major forest produce that the Chenchus collect, more. There are many kinds of trees that give gum. Among them '*Thapsi Trees*' give the superior quality gum. This is called 'White Gum' (*Karia gum*). This white gum has a huge demand in the international market. Apart from this variety, the Chenchus also collect another variety which is called '*Kondagogu Gum*'.

In order to collect gum from trees, the members of a family choose the trees based on their experience and patience. Some families own 50 trees and some other families have even 200 trees for the purpose. The trees that belong to a family are not touched by any other family in the community. The Chenchus consider the trees as their family property. In case anyone dies in a family or if the family migrates, then the other family who want to collect gum from the trees have to obtain permission from the heads of their habitant. It is a general practice in The Chenchus community to inherit trees from father to sons. The process of collecting gum takes place throughout the year.

In order to collect gum, the Chenchu couple set out in the morning with a small knife, some food and drinking water. They also take a dog along with them. First, they mark small cuts on the barks of the trees that belong to them. They mark such cuts to nearly 50 trees. Later, they also mark cuts on the other side of the barks as well so that the barks will not be silted and the trees won't die. Now that the barks of trees are marked with cuts, the trees secrete gum after two days. Now, the Chenchu family collect the gum which may weigh around 1 to 2 kilos. Thus, collected gum is sold at the 'Tribal Co- operative Societies' and encash it.

## Collecting '*Mahua*' Flowers (*Ippa Poolu*)

Along with gum, the Chenchus also collect '*Mahua Flowers*'. These flowers are used in making arrack. The rest of the flowers are sold to people living in open fields and make money. Usually, they start collecting these Mahua flowers in the month of April every year. All the members of the family mostly women go to collect these flowers. The interesting fact is that once the season ends, The Chenchus who are addicted to the intoxication, buy these flowers back from the people whom they sold to earlier.

## Cultivation

Ever since its independence, The Indian Government has been trying to convert the Primitive tribal sects from food collection to food production. As a part of it, The Indian Government has given many consolations to them like land for cultivation, bulls and exemption from land tax etc., However, in the beginning The Chenchus who don't show any interest. But in the later years, organizations like Tribal Welfare Department, ITDA and TCR&TI played a pivotal role in holding many awareness programmes on cultivation and encouraged The Chenchus towards cultivation. As result, the Chenchus started cultivating the land in small scale by removing weeds in them and erecting bamboo fencing around them and finally they started growing corns, sorghum and horse-grain.

Since the last decade, it is clearly seen that The Chenchus have shown great improvement in cultivation. They have even achieved more progress as ITDA has provided them latest modern agricultural tools and tractors. However, this development is not seen in



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all Chenchu Gudems. In the platen regions of Srisailam forests like Naguluti, Bairluti, Atmakur, Dornala, Tummala Bhayalu, Giddalur and Markapuram cultivations is flourishing. Though they not grow rice, they grow crops like corn, maize, jowar, sorghum, horse-grain and millet which require less water to cultivate. Thus, they financially sustained well. Vegetables are grown in their back yards for their use. Only 35% of Chenchu population is engaged in agriculture and 17% of them depend partially on agriculture.

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