

DIET HABITS, HEALTH AND MEDICAL PRACTICES OF THE CHENCHU TRIBE

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Introduction :

The Chenchus, one of the aboriginal tribes, belong to the Proto-Australoid stock, inhabiting the dense forests in Nallamalai ranges, on the south of the Krishna river in the Kurnool district and in the Amrabad plateau of Mahbubnagar and Nalgonda districts of Andhra Pradesh. Some Chenchus are also found in the plains of Guntur and Nellore districts. They are Telugu speaking jungle tribe.

The Chenchus live in small clusters numbering about 10 to 15 hutments, which are beehive shaped, constructed with bamboos and leaves called "pentas". The hut can hardly accommodate the wife and children of a Chenchu.

The Chenchus are primarily food gatherers and hunters. They are experts in honey collection and bamboo cutting. They are forest labourers and collect minor forest produce.

The Chenchus may no longer be reckoned as purely a jungle tribe. Those leading the life of food gatherers in the forest are today in the minority and most of them live now in symbiosis with the peasant folks of the plains. This symbiosis changed the Chenchus to relinquish their old mode of life and adapt themselves to the economy of their more progressive neighbours. This article presents the diet habits and health and medical practices of the Chenchus.

The Diet :

The diet of the Chenchus consists mostly of wild fruits, plants, and tubers. Many of these have not been identified botanically.

Tubers: Nallagadda is an important tuber used as diet and it is available in plenty from the end of cold weather to the beginning of the rains.

Eravala gadda and nula gadda are collected at all times except during rainy season. Chenchu gadda (tubers of *Dioscorea bulbifera* Linn.), donda gadda (*Melothria heterophylla* Cogn), samakura gadda (*Colocasia esculenta* Linn), and chandagadda (*Tacca pinnatifida* Forst), are also used as diet. 'Gita gadda' is eaten in emergency and scarcity, since its consumption is followed by acute indigestion.

Fruits: Berries of sara (*Buchanania latifolia* Roxb), pods of Addatiga (*Bauhinia Vahlia* W & A) and fruits of *Buchanania augustifolia* are important among the fruits eaten. The fig harvest starts in the end of March and is continued in summer. These are also preserved. Tuniki (*Diospyros melanoxylon* Roxb), wild mangoes, *Ficus bengalensis* Linn., and Nakkeru (*Cordia dichotama* Forst.), and Neredu (*Syzygium cumini*

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Linn) are also collected and used as diet. Fruits of Kale chettu (*Carissa spinarum* Linn) chittimiti, jana are also eaten. The following fruits are also collected and eaten.

Telugu Name	Botanical Name
1. Kondaregu	<i>Artocarpus lakoocha</i> Roxb
2. Regupandu	<i>Zizyphus jujuba</i> Lam
3. Parikipandu	<i>Zizyphus oenoplia</i> Mill
4. Palapandu	<i>Artocarpus buchanani</i>
5. Nemmikaya	<i>Mimusops hexandra</i> Roxb
6. Sitaphal	<i>Annona squamosa</i> Linn
7. Balusupandu	<i>Canthium parviflorum</i> Lam
8. Simachinta	<i>Pithecellobium dulce</i> Benth
9. Usirikaya	<i>Emblica officinalis</i> Gaertn
10. Devadaru	<i>Erythroxylum monogynum</i> Roxb

Kasaginjalu (seeds of *Arundo trivialis*) gottepappu (kernels of *Zizyphus Zylop-*chus) and seeds of tamarind are also consumed.

Flowers: Mahua or Ippapulu (flowers of *Madhuca indica* J. F. Gmel) are very important. These are also used for fermentation. Tamarind flowers, Morliputa (flowers of *Buchanania lanzan* Spreng.) and lotus are also consumed.

Leafy Vegetables: The following are the leaf vegetables used by the Chenchus:

Telugu Name	Botanical Name
1. Chanchalakura	<i>Malva parviflora</i> Linn
2. Gongura	<i>Hibiscus cannabinus</i> Linn
3. Totakura	<i>Amaranthus Tricolor</i> Linn
4. Mullatotakura	<i>Amaranthus spinosus</i> Linn
5. Tiyyagura	<i>Amaranthus caudatus</i> Linn
6. Perugutotakura	<i>Amaranthus oleaceus</i>
7. Chirrikura	<i>Amaranthus polygonoides</i>
8. Ponnagantikura	<i>Alternanthera sessilis</i> R. Br.
9. Perantalakura	<i>Corchorus olitorius</i> Linn

Flesh:

The Chenchus occasionally use the flesh of hunted animals and birds and small game like hare, squirrel and monkey. Flesh of sambar and deer is also used. Meat is invariably boiled but no flavouring is added and nothing is eaten with the flesh. Wild animals eaten by the Chenchus include goat, hare, wild cat, porcupine, peacock, jungle fowl, pigeon and smaller birds. Turtles and crabs, white ants and fish are also eaten. Chilly

powder, garlic, onion, turmeric and salt are added. Milk is also used: it is given to the children and ghee is prepared.

Personal Cleanliness :

The Chenchus take bath once in a day. Many do not take bath for days, especially during the winter. The infants are given regular hot water baths. Use of soap or other detergents is very rare.

They may change clothes once in a week and it is very common to come across people wearing unclean clothes emitting foul odour.

The Chenchus brush the teeth in the morning with twigs; but the children do not clean their teeth regularly, which may be one of the reasons for the high incidence of caries.

Marriage and Sex :

The Chenchus observe clan exogamy and monogamy is the common form of marriage. The cross-cousins are predestined marriage partners, and a great many Chenchus do indeed marry back into their mother's family. There is no obligation whatsoever for a young man to marry the daughter of his mother's brother or his father's sister. Another type of marriage frequent among Chenchus is that with a sister's husband's sister.

Chenchu girls are married after the attainment of puberty and free courtship is said to prevail. No ceremony marks the first menstruation. Eventhough premarital adventures are discouraged, love-making among the unmarried is most frequent during the mahua flower season when the boys and girls are merry with liquor.

There is a belief that sexual congress should not take place in complete darkness or when it is raining. For children conceived in darkness may be born blind and children conceived during rain will be weeping always.

If an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, she will try to procure abortion. She will visit the village of an intimate girl friend and manage the situation. Sometimes her lover is forced to marry her.

Pregnancy and delivery :

Sterility is a comparatively rare misfortune among Chenchu women. A wife's barrenness is attributed to the disfavour of the gods. Then the couple resort to divination in order to discover the deity who will help them in their trouble. Miscarriages, which are rare, are ascribed to the malevolence of a deity "who catches hold of pregnant women".

There are no taboos which a pregnant woman must observe, but they avoid papaya fruit (*Carica papaya* Linn) and twin banana which they believe to cause abortion and

twin births respectively. It is considered good for a pregnant woman to work and conduct her usual business, for then delivery will be easy, whereas a woman who sits and does nothing will have a difficult time.

During pregnancy intercourse is continued until the last weeks and is resumed ten or fifteen days after confinement.

The Chenchus believe in soul or *jiva*. The *jiva* is believed to come from the God "Bhagavantarū" and enter the child while it is in the mother's womb. A still born child is a child born before the arrival of the *jiva*.

Chenchus believe that the pregnancy lasts nine months in the case of a boy and ten months if the child is a girl.

In cases of difficult labour, the midwife tries to help by rubbing and pressing and by applying hot water. A midwife may also attempt to turn the foetus into a favourable position by massage. If labour is protracted, supernatural influences are suspected of obstructing the birth and husband tries to discover by divination which deity is responsible for the delay. If it is an evil spirit which is thought to be causing the trouble, the mother is given incense to smell and wise man may be called to pronounce magical formulae to ward off the danger. When all appeals to minor deities are unavailing, and the confinement drags on over a long period, the husband tries to enlist the help of the goddess *Garemaisamma*.

In desperate cases or if the child is believed to have died in the womb, midwife inserts her hand and tries to drag out in an attempt to save at least the mother's life.

The umbilical cord is cut with a knife and tied with any kind of string or thread. The cord and placenta etc., are buried in the ground near the house and the newly born child is laid down on the newly replaced earth and washed with warm water. If the pregnant woman is out collecting roots and gives birth to a child, she manages the cutting of the umbilical cord and other procedures alone. She then wraps the child as well as the placenta in her cloth and brings them both to the village. A husband must never render any practical assistance during childbirth. But it is considered unlucky if the husband happens to be absent from the village at the time his wife is in labour.

No medicine is given to a woman in labour, but soon after delivery the mother is given liquor to drink which is supposed to help remove the excess water from the body and make her healthy. The mother is also fed with a little rice or millet. As soon as she feels well enough she is washed by the midwife. In a very short time, the mother resumes her normal activities.

No ceremonial impurity is observed after childbirth. But as long as a woman is bleeding, she and the midwife are regarded as "unclean". During this time the midwife cooks for the mother and washes her clothes. This rule is not accepted if the midwife belongs to another village.

Mutton and milk products are restricted for three months after delivery. The pregnant and lactating mothers do not have special foods. A liquid porridge prepared out of millet is believed to increase milk. If the lactation is not good, the mother is given the flesh of iguana which is believed to increase lactation. But when a woman dies in childbed, her relations try to rear the child on buffalo milk, though this effort is seldom attended by success.

Child feeding :

The infants are breastfed. The breast feeding usually starts from the second day of delivery and continues till the mother conceives again or upto three years. In the seventh or eighth month, the milk diet is supplemented with a little millet when this is available or some squashed fruit pulp. Many children occasionally take milk from their mother untill they are six or seven years old.

Diseases and treatments :

The physique of the jungle Chenchus is fairly good. Many children suffer from malarial infection and those who survive seem to develop in later years a certain resistance. Diseases like fever, cough, cold, diarrhoea, dysentery, scabies, eye infections, dental caries, joint pains are very common. Tuberculosis and venereal diseases have been introduced into the tribe through contacts with plains people.

For fever the patient is made to drink a mixture of onions, garlic and ginger pounded and stirred with water, but this is not given frequently since all the ingredients have to be bought. In case of mild fevers, all fatty foods are restricted and the patient is allowed to consume only "rice ganji" (gruel). The serious illness requires fasting. After recovering from fevers, the patient is allowed to eat food prepared out of old rice with chilli powder and gradually other foods are given if digestion permits. Brinjal and ongura are always avoided by the sick and convalescent.

In case of diarrhoea and dysentery, unripe raw wood apple (*Feronia elephantum* Correa), arechekka (bark of *Woodfordia fruticosa* Kurz.) and bel fruit (*Aegle marmelos* Corr.) are eaten. Diet is only ganji (gruel) with buttermilk.

Any kind of internal pain, whatever may be the site, is treated by burning the skin over the ache with a twig of "palatiga" or *Adavipalatiga* (*Cryptolepis buchmanii* Roem & Schult). A stem of this creeper is bent double and the looped end, where the bark is cracked, is heated over the fire and applied to the skin. A headache requires burning across the whole breadth of the forehead. A pain in the chest during fever calls for three burns, in the form of a triangle and would seem to cause more pain than it cures. But the Chenchus have great faith in this remedy.

In cases of stomachache, Chenchus simply rub on the stomach, but if the pain persists, they take the leaves of "Baranka" (*Streblus asper* Lour) and rub the milky juice over the aching part.

The Chenchus have few medicines which they eat or drink for internal aches and pains. Leaves of Vayalaku (*Vitex negundo* Linn.,) are eaten to cure abdominal pains.

A decoction of mango bark and "Nelavemu" (*Andrographis paniculata* Nees.) is taken to cure malarial fever.

Cuts and small wounds are usually left to dry and receive no treatment. Serious wounds caused by bearbite or fall from a tree are treated with a paste of saffron mixed with the crushed leaves of *Chloroxylon swietenia* DC. This paste is applied thickly over the wound and seems to contain great healing properties.

When children suffer from swollen tonsils, a crude remedy is employed. "Railaku" (leaves of *Cassia fistula* Linn.,) are rolled up and inserted as far up the nostril as possible. The operator then hammers on the stiff cylinder of the rolled up leaves till blood streams from the nose. Youngsters scream and struggle while this painful treatment is being administered and have to be held down by two or three people, but older children submit uncomplainingly.

"Mogasarigadda" (not identified botanically) boiled with goat milk, dried and powdered taken every day is believed to increase potency. Pillipicharagadda (*Asparagus gonocladus* Baker) eaten after boiling with goat milk is believed to relieve a man completely of his impotency. Bhuchakragadda and onion increase potency and garlic reduces it.

Any illness, the cause of which is beyond the understanding of the Chenchus is attributed to the malevolence of a deity or the angered jiva of a deceased kinsman. If an illness does not yield to any remedy and all appeals to supernatural powers remain fruitless, black magic is suspected. When a chenchu is dangerously ill and lapses into unconsciousness, it is believed that his soul leaves his body.

Deities connected with diseases :

Some deities are propitiated to avert evils. Foremost among them is potsamma, the small pox goddess, sometimes also addressed as Ammavaru. A goddess of great power is Ellamma whose cult is widespread throughout Telangana. Chenchus offer a special puja in order to divert her dangerous influence.

Another village deity is Elpamachena Maisama who is supposed to grant good health. Ceremonial prayers for this goddess are believed to relieve all kinds of diseases, including small pox. Vatikanka is a malignant deity residing near wells responsible for miscarriages.

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SUMMARY

The Chenchus inhabit the dense forests in Nallamallai ranges in Andhra Pradesh. They are primarily food gatherers. The article presents the diet habits and health and medical practices of the tribe.

The diet consists of tubers of Nallagadda, Nulagadda Chenchu gadda etc and fruits of Sara, Adda Tiga, Tuniki, wild mangoes, Neredu etc and some leafy vegetables. Mohua flowers are consumed and used for fermentation. Flesh of birds, sambar, deer, goat, hare, porcupine, etc is eaten. They brush teeth with twigs and take bath once in a day and change clothes once in a week.

Girls are married after the attainment of puberty. Sterility and miscarriages are very rare and are attributed to the disfavour of gods. The pregnant woman avoids papaya fruit and twin bananas and it is considered good for pregnant woman to work normally. In case of difficult labour the midwife, tries to help by rubbing, pressing and by applying hot water, and turning the foetus into a favourable position by massage. Protracted labour is attributed to the supernatural influences. After delivery liquor is given. Children are breastfed and for lactation flesh of iguana is given.

Diseases like fever, cough, diarrhoea, eye and dental diseases are common. Restrictions in food are observed in the diseases. Palatiga, vitex negundo, mango bark and "Nelavemu" are some of the drugs used to cure certain diseases. Some deities are also propitiated to avert evils and cautery is also practised.

सारांश

चेन्चु जाति का खानपान, स्वास्थ्य और चिकित्सा विधि

ले० वी०वी०एस्० शास्त्री

चेन्चु लोग आंध्र प्रदेश के नल्लामलाई श्रेणी के घने जंगलों में रहते हैं। वे मूलतः भोजन संग्रह करते हैं। इस लेखमें उनके खानपान, स्वास्थ्य और चिकित्सा के तरीकों का वर्णन है।

उनके भोजन में नल्लागड्डा, नुल्लागड्डा, चेन्चुगड्डा इत्यादि कंद और फल जैसे सारा, अड्डातीगा, तुनिकि, जंगली आम, नेरुडु इत्यादि और कुछ पत्ते वाली सब्जियां होती हैं। महुआ के फूलों को खाते हैं और उससे शराब बनाते हैं। चिड़ियों, साम्भर, हिरन, बकरी, खरगोश, साही और दीमक का मांस खाते हैं। वे दातून से दांत साफ करते हैं, प्रति दिन एक बार स्नान और सप्ताह में एक बार कपड़े बदलते हैं।

लड़कियों का विवाह उनके जवान होने पर किया जाता है। बांझपन और गर्भपात कभी कभी होते हैं और उनका कारण देवी प्रकोप मानते हैं। गर्भवती स्त्रियों द्वारा पपीता और जुड़वां केला न खाना और सामान्य कार्यों को करना अच्छा समझा जाता है। कठिन प्रसव की अवस्था में धाय रगड़ना, दबाना, मालिश और गर्म जल का प्रयोग करके गर्भ को सही स्थिति में लाने का प्रयत्न करती है। प्रसव का समय लंबा हो जाना अलौकिक शक्तियों का प्रभाव समझा जाता है। प्रसव के पश्चात् मदिरा सेवन कराया जाता है। शिशु को स्तन का दूध पिलाते हैं और दूध में वृद्धि के लिये एक प्रकार की छिपकली का मांस खाते हैं।

ज्वर, खांसी, दस्त और आंख व दांत के रोग सामान्य होते हैं। रोग की अवस्था में भोजन में परहेज करते हैं। पालतीगा निर्गुण्डी, आम के पेड़ की छाल और नेलवेमु जैसी औषधियां कुछ रोगों में दी जाती हैं। दागने की क्रिया भी प्रचलित है। प्रकोपों से बचाव के लिये देवी देवताओं की उपासना भी करते हैं।