

# Understanding the Educational and Socio-Economic Challenges of Chenchu Tribal Students in Andhra Pradesh

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## ABSTRACT

Tribal communities in India are diverse, and each has contributed in a different way to culture, society, and the environment. However, recently, based on their vulnerability and marginalization, tribal communities have been identified as particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) by the Government of India. Research and data have acknowledged that these PVTGs experience issues like environmental pressures, cultural deterioration, and socioeconomic marginalization in a more severe and distinct manner. Therefore, these communities have always been the subject of exploration for researchers. In this paper, researchers intended to identify, select, and thoroughly examine one of the PVTGs in order to study the tribe in detail and offer policy-level recommendations.

This research study adopted a qualitative design to explore the challenges faced by one of the PVTGs, namely, the Chenchu tribe of Andhra Pradesh (AP). It focused on socio-economic and educational challenges encountered by the children of the Chenchu tribe who are enrolled in school and reside in and around the Nallamala forests in AP. Through semi-structured interviews, the study interviewed 50 students who were selected through purposive sampling method from 4 villages. The study examined key dimensions such as livelihoods, education, economic identity, and marginalization experiences in the educational setup. The data were analysed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the children of this tribe face multiple educational challenges arising from poverty, livelihood insecurity, geographical isolation, language barriers, and social marginalization. Based on the findings, the study recommends adopting an integrated and culturally responsive approach involving government agencies, educational institutions, tribal communities, and civil society organisations to enhance educational access, retention, and learning outcomes among Chenchu students through strengthened educational support, improved livelihood opportunities, and the effective implementation of tribal welfare schemes.

**Keywords:** Tribes of India, PVTGs, Chenchu tribe, Challenges, Nallamala Forest, and Field Survey.

## 1. Introduction

The word "tribe" describes a social group that is typically associated with a particular geographic area and is defined by a common ancestry, culture, language, and identity (Mahapatra, 1994). Even though the concept of a tribe has changed over time, it still serves as a basic social organization unit, especially among indigenous and aboriginal populations around the world (Xaxa, V., 1999). The *Lokur Committee* (1965) identified these tribes with the following features:-

a) signs of primitive characteristics; b) a unique culture; c) a reluctance to interact with the general public; d) geographic isolation; and e) backwardness.

**Table 1: Trends in proportion of Scheduled Tribe Population**

Source: <https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/Statistics/StatisticalProfileofSTs2013.pdf>

| Census Year | Total population (in millions) | Scheduled Tribes Population (in millions) | Proportion of STs population |
|-------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1961        | 439.2                          | 30.1                                      | 6.9                          |
| 1971        | 547.9                          | 38.0                                      | 6.9                          |
| 1981 #      | 665.3                          | 51.6                                      | 7.8                          |
| 1991 @      | 838.6                          | 67.8                                      | 8.1                          |
| 2001 \$     | 1028.6                         | 84.3                                      | 8.2                          |
| 2011        | 1210.8                         | 104.3                                     | 8.6                          |

# Excludes Assam in 1981 @ Excludes Jammu & Kashmir in 1991  
\$ The figures exclude Mao-Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur, census 2001,

*“According to U-DISE 2016-17 data, enrolment dropoffs are more severe for Scheduled Tribes students (10.6% to 6.8%), and differently-abled children (1.1% to 0.25%), with even greater declines for female students within each of these categories. The decline in enrolment in higher education is even steeper.”*

*“Tribal communities and children from Scheduled Tribes also face disadvantages at multiple levels due to various historical and geographical factors. Children from tribal communities often find their school education irrelevant and foreign to their lives, both culturally and academically. While several programmatic interventions to uplift children from tribal communities are currently in place, and will continue to be pursued, special mechanisms need to be made to ensure that children belonging to tribal communities receive the benefits of these interventions.”*

**Fig 1. Distribution of Scheduled Tribe Population by States-2011**

Source: <https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/Statistics/StatisticalProfileofSTs2013.pdf>

According to the 2011 Census, there were 10.43 crore people from scheduled tribes, which make about 8.6% (705 in number, notified in 30 states/ UTs) of India's total population (Table 1 and Fig 1). Despite representing a substantial segment of the Indian population, the number of studies and empirical evidence indicate that tribal communities continue to experience multiple forms of marginalization. National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 in para 6.2.1 acknowledges the following:-

In another para of NEP 2020, 6.2.3:-

The continuous practice of exclusion highlights the need for in-depth research to better understand their lived realities, identify the challenges they face, and develop evidence-based interventions for their inclusive and sustainable development.

Out of all the tribes, there are 75 ‘*Particularly Vulnerable Tribe of India*’ (PVTGs), being identified by Niti Ayog, spread across 18 states and one Union Territory. These groups are characterized by pre-agricultural levels of technology, stagnant or declining population, low literacy rates, and minimal interaction with the mainstream population. Data reveals that they primarily depend on subsistence

agriculture, foraging, and small-scale animal husbandry, often living in remote and ecologically fragile regions. Despite their rich cultural heritage, PVTGs face extreme socio-economic challenges and are often excluded from the developmental processes of the country (Sachchidananda, M. 2008, Singh, B., & Jha, M. K., 2013). Among these 75, it was observed that the tribes of Andhra Pradesh (AP) experience a lower literacy rate and high exclusion. Hence, the researchers decided to select one of the PVTGs of AP. From the AP government website, it was further noticed that Chenchu tribe is the most socio-economically and educationally marginalized tribe in AP. It also occupied unique position due to its traditional hunting practices and complete dependence on Nallamala forest. They face persistent challenges such as poverty, isolation, limited access to healthcare, education and livelihood insecurity. Their distinctive identity and vulnerability make this tribe an important tribe for understanding the intersection of tribal development, education, and social inclusion in India (Xaxa, 1999). Hence, the researchers decided to investigate the challenges faced by "The Chenchu," which are dispersed throughout the districts of Mahaboobnagar, Kurnool, Prakasam, and Guntur in the Nallamala forest of AP. This paper is based on the Post-Doctoral research project, titled '*A Study of Intersectionality of Gender, Race and Disability in relation to Education and Aspirations of Rural Tribal Girls with and without Disability*', funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi.

## 2. The Chenchu Tribe: Brief Profile

Chenchus are also known by other names like Chenchucoolam, Chenchwar, Chenswar, and Choncharu and live in and around Nallamala forest. This region is a bio-diversity zone where they majorly rely on hunting, gathering of non-timber products, and medicinal plants (Thamminaina, C., 2015; Ramana, et al., 2018). Chenchu live in small settlements known as "Gudem or Penta", which are beehive-shaped huts, typically simple in appearance (Fig 2).

**Fig 2. Penta of Chenchu Tribe (pictures clicked during data collection)**



**Fig 3: Forest products collected by Chenchu tribe**



The Chenchus follow forest laws and celebrate many festivals. "Mantanallamma" festival is one of the famous festivals of this tribe. The co-existence of Chenchus with the forest works harmoniously as they never kill animals when pregnant. According to numerous studies, the Chenchu tribe are willing to stay in the forest and coexist peacefully with the tigers in the sanctuary (Ramamurthy, M. J., & Hoffman, D. M., 2023). It reflects their commitment to maintaining ecological balance. In the same way, when they dig roots or tubers, they leave some of them in the ground. They occasionally work as forest laborers, but they primarily prefer to hunt and gather food using their innate abilities. Their income comes from selling the jungle products they gather, such as roots, fruits, tubers, beedi leaves, mohua flowers, honey, gum, tamarind, and green leaves, to government cooperatives and traders (Fig 3).

The Chenchu tribe has been affected by modern development, due to which they no longer own much of the forest area. Although the government has been encouraging the Chenchus to adopt an agricultural lifestyle, they are not yet happy with it.

### 3. Review of Related Literature

To understand the socio-economic, cultural, educational, and livelihood conditions of the Chenchu tribe, several research studies were reviewed and presented below:-

Initial studies focused on the livelihood and forest dependence of the Chenchu tribe. **Nadkarni, M. V. (1989)**, it was found that Chenchus' traditional dependence on the forest was being threatened by various developmental programmes of the government. Their property rights and forest access were attacked in the government programmes. Hence, the researcher emphasized that development programmes must protect the rights of forest-dwelling tribes along with improvement in these tribes' access to education, healthcare, and livelihood. Similarly, **Gupta (2024)** examined the impact of wildlife protection laws on forest-dwelling tribes and observed that the Chenchu opposed rehabilitation, as their livelihood and identity were linked to the forest. **Reddy and Kumar (2010)** analysed the economic transition among the Chenchu and reported that declining access to forest resources had become one of the major causes of increasing poverty.

Another group of studies examined the health, nutrition and traditional knowledge of the Chenchus. **Rao et al. (2015)** found that the Chenchus' diet is mostly dependent on forest produce, seasonal food availability and locally available cereals which reflected that they do not get adequate amount of nutrients. **Reddy et al. (1998)** revealed that Chenchus 'possess rich knowledge of traditional medicines as they use medicinal plant species for the treatment. The study also advocated the need to protect their traditional



healthcare practices. In another study, **Jarapala et al. (2021)** documented 34 plant species consumed by the Chenchu tribe. It was found that many wild edible plants were rich in nutrients and had medicinal values. This study again highlighted the importance of preserving the traditional knowledge of Chenchu tribe.

Several other studies also explored this tribe on different dimensions like social and cultural features of this tribe. **Ivanov (2011)** studied the food habits, sanitation practices, and social organisation of the Chenchu tribe in AP and found that Chenchus' food pattern and social bondages are closely linked to their environment and cultural identity. The study concluded that it is important not to obstruct the way these forest-dwelling people live. **Ramesh et al. (1980)** in their study revealed the genetic characteristics of the Chenchu tribe and reported genetic variations, demonstrating their distinct biological identity among Indian indigenous communities.

Several other studies related to the education of tribal women revealed that these women continue to face challenges related to illiteracy, poor reproductive health, patriarchal norms and limited access to development opportunities (**Bhowmick, 2005; Bhasin, 2007; Paray, 2019; Dey, 2021; Paray, 2020 and Gupta 2024**).

The existing literature has documented the Chenchus' dependence on forests, traditional livelihood, health, nutrition, medicinal knowledge, and cultural practices. Some researches also highlighted the poor condition of tribal females. However, there is limited research that provides a comprehensive understanding of their present socio-economic and educational conditions, in the context of changing government policies, modernization, and public services. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the socio-economic, educational, and livelihood conditions of the Chenchu tribe holistically.

#### 4. About the Research:-

It is a multi-disciplinary research that integrates anthropological, sociological, and educational perspectives. This study adopted a descriptive and exploratory research design, believed to be suitable for reporting the socio-economic, and educational dimensions affecting their lives. By adopting participatory research methods, this study not only aimed to document the challenges but also to advocate for policies that uphold the rights and aspirations of the Chenchu tribe. An interview schedule was used to collect the data. As there was a language barrier, the researchers appointed one Telugu interpreter for the study who also knew the Chenchu language since he belonged to the Dornala district, which is also a habitat of Chenchu tribe. The data collected was analysed qualitatively. Based on the findings, the researchers presented recommendations.

##### 4.1 Study Objective:-

The objectives of this research were:-

1. To explore the socio-economic conditions of the Chenchu tribe of Nallamala forest.
2. To know the educational challenges faced by the children of Chenchu tribe of Nallamala forest.

To achieve the above two objectives, one research tool was used, which covered all the dimensions focused in the objectives.

Study Area: The research focused on the Chenchu communities residing in and around the Nallamala forest region, which included Srisailam mandal of Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh (Fig 4). This area was selected due to its significance as the rich habitat of the Chenchu tribe.

*Fig 4: Kurnool district and Srisailam Mandal of AP*



To prepare the sample, purposive sampling was used, in which the researchers purposively selected those schools that had enrolment of Chenchu students. The sample was created from 04 different schools of Gurrappausala, Millampalle, Palutla and Nekkanti villages, to ensure representation from communities with varying levels of educational access, geographical isolation, and socio-economic conditions.

The sample included students from different age groups and educational institutions (state government, ashram and residential schools). The final selection of students was made in consultation with the school's administrative department and tribal welfare functionaries. 50 students were interviewed for this study. Of these, 30 were boys, and 20 were girls. 75% of the students from this sample were from VII grade and above. Students belonging to 75% category were termed as senior students in the study. The selection of the students was based on the participants' ability to provide rich and meaningful insights.

An interview schedule consisting of 08 open-ended questions was designed to gather detailed information on the dimensions of livelihood, education, economic identity, and marginalization (02 questions each). The livelihood dimension explored family occupations and children's involvement in income-generating or household activities; the education dimension examined school experiences and barriers to learning; the economic identity dimension focused on financial constraints and access to educational support schemes; and the marginalization dimension investigated experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and suggestions for improving educational opportunities. The interview schedule provided flexibility for probing responses, enabling the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences. The tool was validated by 02 experts having knowledge and experience from education, sociology and research domains to ensure content validity. In addition, the tool was piloted on a small sample of 05 students before employing it in the study.

Literature reviews of government reports, policy documents, and previous studies related to the Chenchu tribe, data from NGOs and organizations working in the Nallamala forest region, and statistical data from census and tribal welfare department records were used as secondary data.

Responses from interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically (thematic analysis: transcription-coding-theme generation) to identify key challenges and patterns. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were also maintained in the study. The researchers in this study were mindful of respecting the cultural sensitivities of the Chenchu tribe.

## 5. Analysis and Findings of the Study

Since, both objectives were addressed using a single research tool, the data were analysed and findings were presented on a tool-wise basis.

## Analysis of Interview Schedule: Dimension-wise

a) **Livelihood:** Most participants reported that their families depended on forest-based livelihoods, daily wage labour, small-scale farming, animal rearing, and collection of minor forest produce such as honey, fruits, herbs and firewood.

**Fig 5: Pictures taken during the data collection showing farming and animal rearing practices of the Chenchu tribe**



Senior students shared that hunting and gathering were once the primary sources of livelihood but now there is a gradual shift towards wage labour and employment. It was shared by the students that women of the Chenchu tribe mostly engage in selling forest produce and participating in self-help groups, while men work as agricultural or construction labourers. Many female students revealed that they regularly assisted their families in collecting forest products, grazing cattle, farming, or taking care of young kids and household chores, which resulted in irregular school attendance and reduced study time. These findings indicate that livelihood insecurity continues to influence children's educational participation.

b) **Educational Opportunities and Barriers:** Respondents reported that schools were located far from their settlements, transportation facilities were inadequate, and financial constraints prevented families from managing school expenses. Language differences between home and school further complicated children's learning experiences. Many female students indicated that educational facilities in their villages

*Traditional forest-based livelihoods are gradually being replaced by insecure wage employment, while children's participation in household economic activities adversely affects their educational engagement.*

were generally limited to the primary level, forcing students to travel long distances for secondary education, which resulted in discontinuation of studies. Younger respondents viewed education as a pathway to better employment and improved living conditions, whereas some senior students expressed concern that formal schooling was somewhere taking them away from their culture. They have forgotten the practices which their parents used to follow as they try to copy urban styles learnt in Schools. Majorly, almost all the students shared their concern about inadequate educational infrastructure and the need for improvement in quality education within their communities.

*Educational aspirations exist among the students of Chenchu tribe; however, geographical, economic, linguistic, and infrastructural barriers continue to restrict educational access and continuity.*

c) **Economic Identity and Access to Government Support:** Most of the participants acknowledged receiving support through schemes such as scholarships, ration cards, MGNREGA, self-help groups, and educational assistance. However, a few respondents (senior students) did mention the irregularity in the implementation of these schemes. On probing more, it was found that there were problems related to insufficient funds, difficult to access because of bureaucratic procedures, lack of awareness and documentation issues due to which the people of the Chenchu tribe were not able to take full advantage of the governmental schemes. Some students also emphasized the need for vocational education, skill development, and employment opportunities that would enable them to become economically independent. Thus, respondents felt that existing support mechanisms had only partially addressed their economic difficulties.

*Persistent socio-economic exclusion, inadequate awareness of entitlements, and limited institutional support reinforce marginalization; however, education is widely perceived as the key pathway toward empowerment and social inclusion.*

d) **Marginalization and Social Exclusion:** Most respondents expressed feelings of social and economic marginalization. They perceived that their traditional lifestyle was often misunderstood by other students of their school coming from mainstream society, and they were being bullied by students coming from other communities. Several junior students reported limited awareness of the benefits they were entitled to because of unawareness. Some of the senior students were aware that their tribe belongs to a marginalized tribe for which the government has many special schemes and programmes of upliftment. And, still they are not getting their rights in the society. They are still experiencing poverty and exclusion.

## Findings

### 1. Livelihood and Economic Challenges:

The Chenchu tribe continues to depend majorly on forest-based livelihoods, daily wage labour, and

*Although government welfare programmes provide some support, limited awareness, weak implementation, and inadequate economic opportunities continue to constrain the tribe's socio-economic development.*

seasonal agricultural activities. Economic insecurity compels children to participate in household and livelihood activities, affecting their regular school attendance and educational continuity. Although government welfare schemes provide some support, inadequate implementation and limited awareness reduce their effectiveness.

### 2. Educational Aspirations and Barriers

Students increasingly recognise education as a pathway to improved livelihoods and social mobility. However, poverty, irregular attendance, household responsibilities, long distances to schools, and financial constraints continue to impede educational participation and completion.

### 3. Learning Environment and Institutional Constraints

Educational progress is hindered by language barriers, limited academic support, inadequate infrastructure



and the shortage of culturally responsive teaching practices. The absence of mother tongue-based instruction and teachers familiar with tribal culture affects students' classroom participation and learning outcomes.

#### **4. Marginalisation and Social Exclusion**

The respondents perceived themselves as socially and economically marginalized due to geographical isolation, discrimination, and limited access to quality educational and employment opportunities. These structural disadvantages continue to restrict their integration into mainstream society.

#### **5. Need for Strengthening Educational Support**

The tribe emphasized the need for comprehensive interventions, including improved transportation, residential schools, scholarships, career guidance, better implementation of welfare schemes, awareness programmes, and culturally relevant educational practices. Such measures were viewed as essential for enhancing educational access, retention, and long-term socio-economic development.

The study's findings adequately addressed both research objectives by providing a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic conditions of the Chenchu tribe and the educational challenges faced by Chenchu children in the Nallamala forest. The study revealed that persistent poverty, dependence on forest-based livelihoods, limited access to government support, and social marginalization continue to shape the tribe's living conditions and directly influence children's educational participation. At the same time, it highlighted that although Chenchu children increasingly view education as a means for improving their future, barriers such as inadequate educational infrastructure, long distances to schools, language differences, household responsibilities, financial constraints, and culturally insensitive educational practices continue to obstruct their access, retention, and learning outcomes. Thus, the findings demonstrate that the socio-economic realities and educational challenges of the Chenchu tribe are closely interconnected, highlighting the need for integrated, culturally responsive, and tribe-centered interventions to promote both educational advancement and sustainable socio-economic development.

#### **Conclusion**

The interview findings indicate that the interrelated challenges of livelihood insecurity, economic deprivation, geographical isolation, and social marginalization shape the educational experiences of the Chenchu tribe. Although parents and children increasingly recognize education as a means of improving their future and breaking the cycle of poverty, several barriers continue to hinder regular school participation and academic achievement. The findings also highlight the need for culturally responsive educational practice, effective implementation of government welfare schemes, improved infrastructure, and sustained tribe awareness programmes. Addressing these issues through targeted and inclusive interventions can significantly enhance educational access, retention, and overall socio-economic development of the Chenchu tribe.

#### **Recommendations**

*The study demonstrates that educational inequalities among the Chenchu tribe cannot be addressed without simultaneously improving livelihood security, social inclusion, and culturally responsive educational practices.*

- a) **Government and Tribal Welfare Department:** The Central and State Government, in collaboration with Tribal Welfare and Education Departments, should strengthen educational infrastructure in Chenchu habitations by establishing accessible schools, expanding residential facilities, ensuring timely delivery of scholarships and educational incentives, and improving transportation and digital connectivity in remote areas.
- b) **Schools, Teachers and Educational Institutions:** Schools may adopt culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices by incorporating mother tongue-based multi-lingual education in the early grades, recruiting teachers familiar with tribal culture, providing remedial support, and creating a child-friendly learning environment that encourages regular attendance, retention, and academic achievement among Chenchu students.
- c) **Tribe, Parents and Local Leadership:** Tribe leaders, parents, School Management Committees (SMCs), and local self-government institutions may actively promote educational awareness through regular tribe meetings, parental counselling, and awareness campaigns highlighting the long-term benefits of education, gender equity, and the importance of preventing early dropout and child labour.
- d) **Higher Education Institutions, NGOs, and Civil Society:** Universities, research institutions, and non-governmental organizations may collaborate with government agencies to provide career guidance, mentoring, bridge courses, digital literacy programmes, and vocational skill development for Chenchu students. They may also undertake continuous research and tribe outreach to support evidence-based policy interventions.
- e) **Policy Makers and Development Agency:** Policy makers may adopt an integrated development approach that links education with livelihood enhancement, healthcare, nutrition, and social protection. Effective convergence of tribal development programmes, continuous monitoring of educational outcomes, and active participation of the Chenchu tribe in planning and implementation are essential for achieving sustainable educational and socio-economic development.

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