

Earning a livelihood without migrating: the Chenchu tribals

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“It is obvious that tribal areas have to progress. Nobody wants to keep them as museum specimens. It is equally obvious that they have to progress in their own way.”
Jawaharlal Nehru, 1952

There are over 600 so-called Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in India. 75 of them are called Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs); they were earlier known as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) but the label was changed in order to avoid any sense of inferiority. The continued exclusion of these indigenous people, along with discrimination against so-called ‘lower castes’, is a unique feature of Indian society. The Government of India has taken a number of steps for the welfare of the tribal communities, but the PVTGs have benefited less than others due to their extreme social isolation.

The Chenchu tribe of Andhra Pradesh were recognized as ‘PVTG’ in 1975. Their livelihood is based on forest produce and in many ways they are still ‘hunter-gatherers’. Their way of life has not changed fundamentally for hundreds of years. They live in the Nallamalai hills in 338 settlements across the State; their total population is about 40,000.

They gather food or hunt animals from the forests with bows and arrows and knives. They also gather gum, tamarind, plums, and other wild forest products, and trade them for food grains at a cooperative which has been set up by the State Government. They rear goats, sheep, buffaloes and cows, and they sometimes get jobs such as tiger trackers or tourist guides, as well as work under Government schemes.

The tribe is divided into distinct clans with a common culture. Marriages between cousins are common, and their overall literacy rate is 32.3%. Since the Chenchu people have lived in isolated hill settlements and forests for centuries, they have often been excluded from government development programmes, which can provide facilities such as communication, education, healthcare, clean water and sanitation.

The State Government set up the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), in 1975 in order to improve the condition of the tribal people, and to make them aware of government schemes which could help them. In 1988 the ITDA was moved from Hyderabad to Srisailem which is closer to the Chenchu communities in the Nallamalai hills.

The ITDA implemented a number of programmes, but without great success. Mandli Jayamma, a Chenchu tribal woman from Mahabubnagar district in Andhra Pradesh, was given two acres of land under the Recognition of Forest Rights Act 2006). The land was not cultivated and did not yield enough for her family to meet even its basic survival needs. She tried to augment her income through collection and sale of non-timber forest products such as herbs, firewood and leaves, but her earnings were meager and largely seasonal. She could barely survive, and education and healthcare for her three young children, as well as making some savings for the future were luxuries she could not even dream of.

She commented, *‘We do get work sometimes under some government scheme or other but the earnings are not enough and sometimes we have to wait for years for the money to be released.’* Jayamma with her husband and children struggled with starvation, malnutrition, and poor health, and had to migrate to the city for work.

Nearly all the families of the Chenchu tribe have had the same experience, ever since the Nagarjuna Sagar Srisailem Tiger Reserve was set up in 1983— this is India’s largest tiger reserve and it does protect some tigers and attract some tourists, but it also pushed the tribe into extreme poverty. In 2009 the Chenchu Special project was introduced in the area, as an outgrowth of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which was enacted in 2005. This Act guarantees 100 days of employment every year to any rural household where someone is willing to do unskilled manual work on public works at the statutory minimum wage of Rs120 per day at 2009 prices, or around two dollars. Every rural family is entitled to this work, so that there are no issues of eligibility or exclusion, and the low wages ensure that only those who need it are interested to participate.

The Chenchu Special project was launched by the Government’s Integrated Tribal Development Authority in May 2009, in order to address the problem of the Chenchu people migrating to cities in search of livelihoods. Similar projects that were successful in other parts of the country were not as successful in Chenchu areas because the issues facing them were unique. The Chenchu Special Project was designed to focus on the root cause of the issue, by ensuring livelihoods in the people’s own local area.

The usual NREGA procedures were changed so that the Chenchu tribe could benefit. Each household was offered employment throughout the year whereas the NREGA ensured only 100 days of wage employment. Half of the daily wage is paid in advance to Chenchu workers to enable them to meet their expenses and keep them engaged.

The Act provides only pays in money, but the Chenchu scheme provides food baskets instead of money, in order to tackle starvation. Most wage payments under the Act are paid into worker’s bank accounts, and they are often delayed. The Chenchu workers were paid in cash, on time, through their local Village Organizations.

The Chenchu farmers' land was dry and unfertile and was little used. The project includes work to make the land suitable for farming, and this is now an added source of income. All this work has been carried out in the local area, thereby preventing migration.

Every Chenchu person who wants work is employed for fifteen days a month, throughout the year, and is paid Rs 2200, about \$35. The payments are made immediately, with 50% being paid in advance, and the work usually starts as soon as it has been authorized. A strong field team is built into the project's management, and they reach the remotest villages and hamlets, far into the forests.

The main challenge facing the team was to get the people to trust a government scheme, but people like Jayamma had little choice but to try their luck with it, given their desperate situation and their reluctance to migrate.

The project was similar to earlier projects which provided livelihoods to the Chenchu tribal people, but it was structured to avoid previous pitfalls. Jayamma now says, *'We have worked under the Chenchu Special project since 2009 and are assured 15 days of wage employment in a month throughout the year. There have been no delays in payments so far.'*

Jayamma and her family's lives have changed completely. They now earn Rs 6,165 per month or almost a hundred dollars, and they can afford sufficient food, clothing and healthcare. None of the family have migrated since the project started. The people have been able to revive and cultivate their land, and to have enough food during the off-seasons. The children are going to school and the family saves some money every month.

Ramudu, Jayamma's husband now says: *"The NREGS Chenchu Special project has made us realise how bread tastes with butter which we never could earlier when we migrated or were involved in other projects."*

Over 6000 houses have been provided to the Chenchu community, along with drinking water and electricity connections. Over 160 schools have been set up, with trained local teachers and more than 10,000 pupils, and the the ITDA has also established fifty health centres, including two hospitals, and 300 Chenchu women have been trained and appointed as local health workers in every settlement. Almost 30000 bed nets been supplied to reduce the incidence of malaria.

To promote farming, over 9000 acres of land have been distributed, and a special agency had been set up by the State Government in 1956 to provide a market for the forest products collected by the Chenchu tribe and to give them a fair price, as well as to supply them with subsidized foodstuffs under the national food rationing system.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) manages the internet website (nrega.ap.gov.in) which shows progress on a daily basis, and the whole process is managed with a fully integrated software application.

Computer centres have been set up at each *mandal* or sub-district, to act as local facilitation hubs, and progress is recorded and reviewed through the state-level server, which analyses the data and reports progress on a daily basis, including the numbers of wage seekers enrolled, wages paid, settlements covered, jobs completed and so on. The information is aggregated for the whole State, but the figures for each settlement can quickly be obtained for detailed monitoring of progress.

Some of the major challenges were the remoteness of the Chenchu settlements, the high level of alcoholism, the shortage of educated young people from the community itself to help in implementation, and the need to obtain permission from the local forest department for any activities in the forest areas where most of the Chenchu people live. The normal wage rates which are paid under the NREGA were not appropriate, as there were few opportunities for public work projects in the hilly areas, and the long distances increased transport costs. As a result, private businesses were not keen to participate.

There was a need for close co-ordination between the ITDA, and the local forest department, but this was not always forthcoming, and the Chenchu people themselves were only interested in land development because they had little experience of other work. Communication was not easy because of poor connectivity.

But in spite of these and other challenges the project succeeded. It had many strengths; it created local livelihoods, and was able to attract large numbers of workers because of the advance payments. The work was all in land development, which was not complicated and suited the tribal people. The membership of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) was homogeneous which helped them to work together.

It was important to have special programmes to make the people aware of the project, and the conversion of existing SHGs into labour groups with stable membership through the provision of waged employment throughout the year helped the project to succeed. The project staff showed the Chenchu people how land development could be an additional source of income. As with the project itself, it was vital to inform the people by actual demonstration; seeing was believing. The monitoring system, with MIS reports updated every day, helped the management to keep the project on track, and the management ensured that the Chenchu people took on the ownership and control of the project themselves.

The food baskets also helped to ensure that the people were physically fit and could carry out the physical work required for the project.

The project significantly improved the people's living standards. Their physical strength and health has improved as a result of regular labour and increased food intake because they were earning more and were better fed through the food basket scheme. The men were kept busy with the work, and their alcohol consumption dropped. Children are going to school rather than having to work with their parents, and their level of education is rising.

Paid employment is now locally available and this has reduced migration, the people's purchasing power has increased, and they are more aware of the outside world because they now watch TV and have their own mobile phones. They have better access to health care and can use the NREGS team vehicles in case of emergency, and some members of the community have started to visit cities and other areas for leisure and shopping. The Chenchu people have traditionally been reluctant to interact with government officials, but the frequent visits of the NREGS team and their rapid responses to problems has made the people more ready to approach and talk freely to government staff.

The food basket scheme was effective in many ways. It stopped people from spending their wages on liquor, and it provided nutritious food such as red gram, wheat flour, turmeric and chilli powder, and cooking oil. This helped to reduce malnutrition and related diseases such as TB.

In each of the four years from 2009 to 2013, about 16000 people were enrolled and about 6000 households have had at least 100 days of wage employment through the programme.

The project offers year round employment to those who want to work in this way, and the land development and farming on the land create livelihood assets for the community. This ensures sustainable income generation, but also gives the people enough time to practice their traditional way of life. The project has become well-known not only within the Chenchu tribe but also to other government departments.

The Chenchu people were not open towards government interventions and officials, but the NREGS Chenchu Special Project has been well accepted and has attained remarkable success in improving their living standards. The success of the project cannot be attributed to a single factor or a single stakeholder. The project did not follow the normal MGNREGA guidelines, and its success arose from its design, its flexibility, the dedication of the implementation team, the use of IT, the strong monitoring system and the cooperation of Chenchu community, among many other factors.

The people's livelihoods have been improved, but the project has also made a significant contribution to the social status, the health and education of the community. Children go to school, nutrition has improved, alcohol consumption has been reduced and the people now

have mobile phones, TV and other assets that are increasing their awareness of outside world.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The project has taken a single step in the improvement of living standards for one of the most vulnerable groups of the country. But there is still much to be done. Many other vulnerable groups have to be assisted, the Chenchu people themselves cannot remain dependent on government subsidized wages for ever, and it is hard to preserve traditional cultures while also providing opportunities for livelihoods. There are hundreds of development schemes and programmes in every region of India, but it is still questionable whether they are designed and implemented in a way that really suits the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

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