

THE CHENCHUS

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AND

THE MADRAS POLICE

PARTS I & II

(From the Publicity Bureau)

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THE CHENCHUS AND THE MADRAS POLICE.

(From the Publicity Bureau, Madras.)

PART I.

Of the wild tribes of this Presidency, the Chenchus of the Nallamalais, present the ugliest problem to the administration. They are a forest tribe, living in small villages or *gudens*, scattered here and there in the forests on the eastern and western slopes of the Nallamalais which traverse the Kurnool district from north to south. Few of them care to till the land. They live partly by collecting forest produce, by grazing cattle and by hunting. But no small share of their livelihood is derived from theft, dacoity and the levy of blackmail from the neighbouring ryots and from the pilgrims who visit the Srisailem temple. All observers agree in describing them as idle, improvident, drunken, thievish and brutal. Unlike the Khonds of Ganjam, they appear to have few good qualities to set off against these shortcomings. They are not remarkable for intelligence, but they have learnt to distill arrack and to manufacture serviceable bows and arrows, and some of them are in possession of firearms. At home, they burn the forest in order the more easily to pick up the Ippa flower which they distill. They then get drunk, quarrel and shoot each other. Outside the forests, they plunder the ryots and pilgrims who are so unlucky as to come within their reach, murdering those who are rash enough to resist. We are apt in these days to despise the bow and arrow, but our forefathers knew better, and so do those who come in contact with the Chenchus. In fact, no constable, forest watcher or abkari peon dare interfere with a Chenchu carrying bow and arrows, and the pilgrim or ryot stands a poor chance of his life, if he endeavours to protect his property.

By the year 1914, the Chenchus had made themselves such a nuisance to the Forest Department and to the neighbouring ryots, that Government found it necessary to appoint a special officer to see how the problem could best be attacked. As a result of this officer's report, a very remarkable experiment was tried.

A special officer was appointed with orders to get into touch with the Chenchus to gain their confidence, to use his influence to induce them to give up dacoity and burning the forest and to bring them into friendly relations with all the officers of Government. Mr. Saunders, a junior police officer, was selected for the post. From 1917 to 1919 he lived in the Nallamalais among the Chenchus. The police of this Presidency are often blamed because they do not see that it is their duty and privilege to act as moral reformers; but Mr. Saunders certainly did not deserve this reproach. He regarded himself not as an ordinary police officer but as a missionary of humanity, and if the converts he made were few and unsatisfactory that was not his fault. The self-sacrificing zeal with which he devoted himself to his work was beyond praise. His experience during those two years were something more than extraordinary. Nothing can illustrate so well the nature of the Chenchus and the difficulties which he had to face, as the following extract from one of his reports:—

"While there was no work, the Chenchus, as was inevitable, became more troublesome. I spent much of my time in Bairluti and the neighbourhood, trying to keep them quiet. It was an eventful experience largely

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Chenchus go, rather a rough customer; but I had brought him in from the jungle and found him work. He was absurdly grateful and I found much that was likeable in him. The manner of his death was a black tragedy. It occurred as the sequel to the panchayat. For more than two months there was comparative peace in the *gudem*; then one Sunday afternoon Bodigadu and his companions got more than usually drunk and the old grievance returned. They sallied forth to seize Komati who was then under the protection of another uncle Pedda Atchigadu. Pedda Atchigadu remonstrated and without warning they fell upon him. His old mother who is quite 60 years old rushed between them. Pedda Atchigadu escaped with a cut on his knee, and the old woman's arm was cut to the bone from the shoulder nearly to the elbow. Meanwhile, Pedda Atchigadu had run to another corner of the *gudem* and taken sanctuary there. Two of Bodigadu's companions, Nagalutigadu and his brother Pedda Ethigadu, pursued him, and he took refuge with another clan of Chenchus who had a long standing feud with Bodigadu's set. These the Chigurla clan turned out, shot down Pedda Ethigadu and wounded Nagalutigadu. I had come to the *gudem* and caught Bodigadu and another supporter, Polugadu, who were attacking the old woman, and while I was taking them off to the depot this other incident occurred. It took some time securing Bodigadu and Polugadu and dressing the old woman's injuries at the bungalow, and it was dark by the time I went back to the *gudem*. I dressed Nagalutigadu's injuries and then learnt that Pedda Ethigadu had not returned. It was by this time quite dark and none of the Chenchus would accompany me to the huts of the Chigurla clan on the far side of the *gudem*. I went and searched round the huts with a lantern and after ten minutes I found him. He had been pierced by five arrows one of which went right through his heart. I lit a fire to keep away the hyenas and then had to go and mount guard over the two prisoners at the bungalow. I think this without exception was the most depressing night I have ever experienced. Bodigadu and Polugadu were sent to jail for one year. The entire Chigurla clan, men, women and children disappeared into the jungle, and it was weeks later when I accidentally found some of the women and children under the trees. Through them I was able to get into touch with the men, and eventually after four or five unsuccessful attempts brought them back to the *gudem*. Before this was done, I had to take the 'milk' oath. This consisted in having milk poured into the hollow of my hands and my swearing that the milk would burn out my throat, rot my bowels and have various other unpleasant effects of the same kind, if I betrayed them to the police. I then had to drink the milk. They thought a case of murder was pending against them, and would not believe me when I told them that they had acted in exercise of the right of self-defence, and there was no police charge against them. The 'pau basa,' as it is called, quite satisfied them. By these events the tale of the panchayats spread to other *gulems*. It happened at the time that the Rs. 25 to be paid to the prospective husband was not forthcoming. Fearing lest, after all, the disputes would not be ended I advanced the Rs. 25 without further argument and brought the proceedings to a close. Many weeks later at Pasurutla there was a dreadful scene. It is the custom in polite Chenchu society for a man who carries off another man's wife or betrothed to pay compensation in cash. Here a certain Chenchu buck was under the necessity of paying up and indignantly complained that I had put up the price of wives. He asserted that the outside limit was Rs. 8 or Rs. 10, and practically said I was traitor to my sex in having admitted such an outrageous claim as Rs. 25 in the panchayat, and above all

in having put down the cash. Another shock was in store for me. When I advanced the Rs. 25 I never expected or wanted to see it again and was content to think the quarrelling would cease and in time forgot all about it. Nearly twelve months later, while I was talking to one of the older and better behaved men at Bailuti, he made several allusions to my 'wife'. As I had had no matrimonial ventures, I set out to find out what he meant. I then learnt that no man would marry the unfortunate girl Komati for fear that I should come down on him for the repayment of the money and in the meantime she was referred to as my wife by right of purchase; I hurriedly caused it to be made known that I would bestow the Rs. 25 as dowry on any prospective husband. Truly these panchayats are traps for the unwary. It is a perfect marvel that there are not more accidents. It is not uncommon in the *gudem* that when one Chenchu is rather more cocked than the rest, he takes the field, so to speak, and the others hurriedly conceal themselves in their huts. Then if any one has displeased him, he will show his disapproval by shooting arrows at the hut. The huts are only made of rough bamboo wattle work, and more often than not the arrows penetrate inside. On one of these occasions arrows passed between a man's wrist and the bracelet he was wearing. Some weeks later, this same man, Vanamulgadu, himself took the field and selected the school building as the object of his dislike (I never discovered why). One of his arrows passed under the arm of a boy in the school and between his body and the slate he was holding. This was particularly objectionable as it got on the nerves of the unhappy teacher and nearly involved the closing of the school. I am afraid my attitude to the many Chenchus who have strayed from the paths of virtue must appear strange. The fact is that those wanted by the police for murder and dacoity as well as minor offences, such as illicitly distilling arrack and stealing timber, were at large in the jungle and never or seldom seen by any official. These formed a dangerous band of outlaws, who, having no work, were driven to crime to obtain food. Experience showed that one might as well try to catch the spotted deer as these Chenchus. It seemed to me that it would be more satisfactory on all accounts if I could bring these men back to the *gulems*, and keep them at work under supervision. Through their relations, wives and children I got into touch with them, and succeeded in bringing them in and getting them to work. We had an understanding that any one of them could come to me openly, and I would find them work and would not arrest them as long as they remained with me and behaved themselves. If they come to me, trusting me, I always respected their confidence in me and on this principle I have been able to get into touch with even the outlaw section and have to some extent been able to influence them. This is how it comes about that I refer in terms of more or less personal intimacy to certain murderers and dacoits."

For two years Mr. Saunders worked among the Chenchus, doing the work of a pioneer of civilization. With the help of the Forest and Agricultural departments, he set about teaching the Chenchus to cultivate the land. He worked with his own hands side by side with the Chenchus in the field, hoping, by his example, to overcome their idleness. He grew mulberry bushes and obtained silk worms from Mysore. The lac insect was introduced from the Central Provinces. He arranged with the Forest Department to provide the Chenchus with regular coolie work by which they could earn a living wage. He opened schools for the Chenchus, and when the trained teachers fled away, he recruited the best substitutes he could get from among the few educated men in the neighbouring villages. He enticed the

Chenchu children to the school by the bait of parched rice and dhol. He laboured to teach them physical drill, the habit of washing and the game of football. The difficulties he met with were extraordinary. The trained teachers obtained for the school were frightened away by fever and arrows. The moment the children became bored, they vanished in the jungle, and school hours had to be limited to an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. Cholera, smallpox and drought made their appearance. The Forest Department sometimes found it impossible to provide honest work for the Chenchus to do; the indolence and drunkenness of the Chenchu seemed sufficient to defeat all efforts to establish village industries among them while Mr. Saunders' own health was giving way under repeated attacks of malaria.

At the same time, Chenchu crime instead of diminishing began to increase with alarming rapidity. This was partly due to the drought which added to the difficulty often experienced by the Chenchus in finding means for earning an honest living. But it was probably also due in part to the protection which the Chenchus had recently received from the attentions of the ordinary police. To give Mr. Saunders every chance of winning the confidence of the Chenchus, the ordinary police had avoided interfering with the Chenchu *gudems*. The result was that the bad characters among the Chenchus had enjoyed an unusual immunity in their enterprises, and they were able to demonstrate to the rising generation that it was possible with little or no risk to gain by crime in a single night far more than could be earned by six months' honest labour. Their school of thought naturally acquired considerable prestige, and Mr. Saunders found himself unable to counteract its influence.

So, in the end, after two years' devoted work and much fever, Mr. Saunders himself had to own that what he was doing 'did not seem to be leading anywhere.' His experiment had been a failure, the kind of failure, that is not less honourable than success. It had become plain that the Chenchus could not be reformed till they had been made to understand that crime does not pay. And, if this was necessary in the interests of the Chenchus themselves, it was even more necessary in the interests of their unfortunate neighbours as will be explained in the second part of this narrative.

PART II.

In the first part of this narrative extracts were inserted to give a picture of the Chenchus as seen from within by Mr. Saunders.

The following extracts will show how the Chenchus appeared to the ryot, the traveller and the magistrate:—

In the beginning of 1920, the Inspector-General of Police reported:—
"Chenchu crime has increased to an appalling extent. In 1919 alone there were 68 Chenchu *dacoities* against 13 in 1917. The road from Atmakur to Nandyal is practically closed to ordinary travellers and crime all along the foot of the hills has increased enormously.

Purely Chenchu crime has become still more brutal and many shocking cases of rape in conjunction with dacoity have been reported. There have also been convictions for this offence.

A still more serious result has been that the villagers have been co-operating with the Chenchus in crime to an increasing extent. They would certainly not do this if they were adequately supported in resisting Chenchu crime which under the present system they are not.

"There are large numbers of Chenchus at large who are wanted for various grave crimes."

About the same time, the District Magistrate was writing: "Schemes of moral reclamation may possibly revive hereafter. But the first and essential piece of education needed by the Chenchu is respect for the law. Till that is knocked into him, it is absolutely futile to offer him education, honest work, etc., etc. He prefers a life of (practically) unpunished crime. For a person of his mental outlook it is a pleasanter, jollier life." Again:—

"I don't think the Chenchus want any 'protection' just at present. It is the 'undepressed' ryot who needs protection." Again:—

"The Chenchus' bow and arrow is a formidable weapon. I have to-day read the report of a case in which some Chenchus were caught in the act of robbery. They withdrew to the forest covered by a rear guard of boys. It is quite impossible to ask police men or any other men to chase uselessly on sudden death."

In another letter the District Magistrate expresses the opinion that "offering schools and co-operation to the Chenchus in their present temper is like offering chicken bones to a tiger."

Here is an extract from a police report:—

"S. Hanumantha Rao, clerk of the Joint Magistrate, Nandyal, was dacoited by Chenchus on the Atmakur-Velgode road at 11-30 a.m., on the 26th February 1920, and robbed of property valued at about Rs. 300."

"The huts of the Chenchus were searched and a lot of property consisting of clothes and jewels were recovered and also the uniform of police constable No. 636 who was dacoited in Velgode at the beginning of the year."

Here is another from a police report of 5th March 1920: "About 20 Chenchus of Chintalamudipi gudem carried away four thumus of korra grain from the thrashing floor of the village munsif Yerraguntla Venkata-pathi of Nagatur at 4 a.m., on the 2nd March 1920. Hearing the occurrence from Parsineni Chenchugadu, a servant of the village munsif, about 20 villagers collected themselves at the thrashing floor from the village and went in the direction taken by the Chenchus. There are some Sugale huts at one mile to the north of the thrashing floor and as the Chenchus stayed there shooting fowls and trying to extort rice, etc., from the Sugales, the villagers approached and pursued the Chenchus a furlong's distance. Then the Chenchus dropped the grain loads and attacked the villagers with bows and arrows, swords and battle axes. The villagers met the Chenchus flinging stones and using sticks. Yerraguntla Ramayya, a cousin of the village munsif, received an arrow in the chest and he killed his assailant by one blow with stick on the head. Then two Chenchus slew Yerraguntla Ramayya with swords and the rest of the Chenchus injured three others."

The Government had all along been reluctant to send an armed police force into the Nallamalais. They felt a natural anxiety as to the consequences that might result if armed police were let loose in a wild country to hunt down a primitive people. But these and similar reports convinced them that it was necessary to take vigorous action to restore the reign of law and to ensure the safety of the villagers.

An officer of the rank of District Superintendent of Police, Mr. Pitt, was selected to take charge of the operations, and a force of 150 armed constables was put at his disposal. He was given a list of 55 Chenchus and Boyas

against whom warrants of arrest were pending on grave charges such as murder, dacoity and robbery and he was instructed to effect the arrest of as many of these men as possible.

The difficulties of the operation will be plain when one remembers that the absconding Chenchus were roaming at large in the forests on both flanks of the Nallamalai range over an area covering some hundreds of square miles, that these forests are perhaps the most feverish in the Presidency, and that the men to be arrested were desperate men armed with very effective bows and arrows and a few guns. Worst of all Mr. Saunders had recorded the opinion that a regular police force has about as much chance of arresting a Chenchu in the forest as it has of arresting a spotted deer.

Before assembling his force, Mr. Pitt went to the scene of operations to make himself acquainted with the nature of the ground and of the Chenchus and to consult with the local officers. His survey convinced him that Mr. Saunders was perfectly right in his view that it was hopeless to expect the police to catch an absconding Chenchu. Neither the forest subordinates nor the neighbouring villagers appeared to be in a position to give any effective help. He was forced to the conclusion that none but the Chenchus could catch the absconding Chenchus. But the local officers held that it was entirely impracticable to induce the tame Chenchus to catch the criminals whose loot they were in the habit of sharing.

The police, however, are learning to study the psychology of their opponents and whether by chance or design a way was found by which the co-operation of the Chenchus was effectually secured. The education of the Chenchu is limited. He knows nothing of the humanitarian motives which hold back Government from putting forth their full power. But if his education is limited, his imagination is lively. After certain high officials had visited the Chenchu gudems and spoken with the resident Chenchus, wonderful rumours began to fly abroad about the terrible and portentous things that were about to happen if the absconders were not handed up. For three weeks these rumours spread without producing any tangible results. But at the end of that time, long before the arrival of the special police force, the Chenchus of Bairlutigudem caught a young murderer with whom they were at feud and surrendered him to a forest range officer Mr. Y. P. Lakshmayya Nayudu, and two police officers Mr. V. Narasimha Ayyar, Circle Inspector of Police and Mr. O. S. Narayana Rao, Sub-Inspector who had succeeded in gaining their confidence. The next day another forest range officer Mr. S. A. Dawson and a forester Mr. Arulanandam got the Chenchus of gudem to assist them in arresting one Malaku Poligadu, a criminal belonging to another gudem, and a week later Mr. Dawson and Martin, a forester, induced the Pangidi Chenchus to capture and surrender another absconding Chenchu.

From these beginnings the employment of Chenchus developed. By the 1st of September the special force of armed constables had arrived. It was used to blockade Nallamalais so as to cut off the absconding Chenchus from food while the tame Chenchus in the gudems received rations. At the same time the presence of the force was effective in maintaining the proper psychological atmosphere. Absconding Chenchus who had kept up their connexion with their gudem were arrested by the men of the gudem. But there were others who were roaming at large in armed bands. To locate and follow up these bands, Chenchus were enlisted and paid as temporary constables. Within a fortnight of the arrival of the special force, 25 out of the 28 absconders in the Western Nallamalais had been arrested. The blockading

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force on the Western Nallamalais was then withdrawn and concentrated ready to cross the Nallamalais if no fresh outbreak of crime followed its withdrawal. For a week after the withdrawal no crime was reported and on the 20th of September the force crossed the range and strengthened the blockade on the western slopes of the Nallamalais where large gangs of Chenchus armed to the teeth were daily committing offences. By the 7th of October it became possible to draw in the blockading lines and to occupy posts which restricted the last remaining absconders, two gangs of 18 criminals in all, to an area of about 100 square miles. It took another month for the Chenchus to track out these men but by the 11th of November success had been achieved and the special police force was withdrawn and demobilized.

During this last stage in the operations the blockading lines extended through the forest for a distance of over thirty miles and it would have been impossible to keep up communications and maintain the blockade but for the work of the signallers. For want of telescopes and helios signalling had to be carried on at night with lamps from suitable eminences and for want of men no guards could be supplied to the signallers. The nature of the country in which they were working can be understood from the fact that the signallers reported themselves as being 'constantly molested by tigers and evil spirits.' Nevertheless Mr. Pitt tells us they stuck to their job and performed their duty splendidly.

The net result of the operations of the force was the arrest of 49 out of 55 absconding criminals. The best proof of the extraordinary ability, tact and patience with which Mr. Pitt conducted these operations is the fact that in the capture of these 49 armed and desperate criminals, not a single shot was fired and not a single Chenchu was injured. The only shots fired in the Nallamalais while the operations were going on were fired in an attack made by the Chenchus upon two constables employed in escorting a party of plains-villagers who had come to track out a gang of criminals. The Chenchus had guns and fired on the constables who fired back in self-defence killing one Chenchu. A magisterial inquiry was held, and the magistrate found that the police had acted in self-defence and that the killing was justifiable. This incident did not form part of Mr. Pitt's operations. It is narrated here because it shows how extraordinary was Mr. Pitt's success in avoiding the use of firearms.

Mr. Pitt makes special mention of the help he received from the Assistant Chenchu Officer Muhammad Husain Khan Sahib, Y. P. Lakshmayya Nayudu, Forest Range Officer, Bairluti, A. J. M. Snaize, Forest Range Officer, Sivapuram, K. T. Venkatachari, Forester, Pechuruvu, T. G. Venunatha Rao, Forester, Rudraode, J. J. Martin, Forester, Pangidi, Tangalla Qasim Sahib, Forester, Chilakacherla, Ghaus Piran, Forester, Kalanutala, and Sergeant T. A. Sumner. He notes also that the Chittoor detachment of the special force was exceptionally efficient, the local officers having sent the pick of the Chittoor armed reserve.

The District Magistrate reports that the success of these operations has been effective in checking crime and quieting the Chenchu for the time being.

But the problem of finding an honest means of livelihood for the Chenchu and of inducing him to adopt it permanently has still to be solved and the Government are now again giving it their attention.