



OF FOOLISH ANCESTORS, AND LAND OVER WEAPONS: POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF THE “DEVELOPMENT” OF CHENCHU

Meenakshi Narayan¹

Abstract

Based on fieldwork conducted among the Chenchu, a tribal community of Andhra Pradesh, India, this paper discusses the effects of physical displacement on the ethnomedical knowledge of the community. Furthermore, it gives an account of how the Chenchu view their lives following displacement positively, thereby demonstrating apathy toward their Chenchu identity. Contrasting the apathy demonstrated by the Chenchu toward their identity with growing concerns over the need to preserve eroding knowledge systems, this paper raises the question, how can knowledge loss or erosion be addressed when groups like the Chenchu no longer wish to identify with their traditional ways of life? Using a political ecology framework, my paper is a conversation between the critique of development discourse surrounding tribal development and growing concerns over loss of indigenous knowledge systems; Through this conversation, I describe two contradictory but simultaneous phenomena: tribal development, which often assumes displacement as a precursor to progress in the Indian context, and efforts of preserving indigenous knowledge system, which require the socio-geographic context in which they operate to remain intact. By juxtaposing these two processes, this analysis brings to light an inherent contradiction in the current development discourse undertaken by the Indian state toward tribal communities. This contradiction helps explain why India's tribal development project continues to perpetuate the marginalization it aims at overcoming. This paper ultimately challenges the existing paradigm of tribal development that not only explains growing apathy of the Chenchu toward their tribal identity, but also contributes to their sustained disempowerment.

Keywords: displacement; ethnomedicine; identity; development discourse; loss of indigenous knowledge; political ecology

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Meenakshi Narayan

Introduction

There once lived a benevolent king in the areas close to where our ancestors lived. The king promised that they would be given whichever they chose – land or weapons – and our ancestors chose weapons.

This story was narrated to me numerous times by several members of the Chenchu community, a *Telugu* speaking tribal group of Andhra Pradesh, India, among whom I conducted fieldwork in 2009, investigating continuity and change in their knowledge system following their physical displacement. The tale was meant to reflect the foolishness of their ancestors who, in the opinion of Chenchus today, forsook a more secure life based on agriculture for a highly risky and uncertain one depending on forests. The common Chenchu refrain is that it was because of that choice made by their ancestors that they live amidst such poverty today.

Based on fieldwork conducted amongst the Chenchu, this paper unravels the political ecology of the tale narrated and addresses the following questions: What are the socio-political factors that influence the Chenchu to view their lives as miserable? Which larger processes encourage the Chenchu to favor agriculture over forest-dependence? Lastly, why do the Chenchu see themselves as poor and unhappy?

This paper seeks to answer these questions through the following roadmap: In section II, I outline the historical evolution of state policy towards forests and tribal communities in India. In the next section, I describe the methodology used to generate the findings in this research. Moving on to my findings, I discuss the government policies which constituted the terms of Chenchu displacement following which I explore continuity and change in Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge, as experienced by individuals in the community today. Building on the findings of my field research, section V brings to light an inherent contradiction in the current discourse toward tribal development within the Indian context. Providing an overview of the larger picture of tribal development in India, this paper ultimately urges for a paradigm shift in the existing discourse toward one that keeps tribal communities at the forefront of decision-making.

Literature Review: Reconciling Tribal Development with Concerns over Knowledge Loss

When India became independent in the year 1947, leaders of free India had the mammoth task of rebuilding a nation left highly impoverished by British rule. As a result, the prime drive following independence was towards rapid development which entailed industrialization and improving infrastructure and communication, including projects such as the construction of large-scale dams, transport links, roads, mines, power plants, and urban infrastructure to name a few. While being essential, the economic project of development adversely affected tribal communities who often lived in resource rich areas where these projects were to be undertaken, thereby necessitating their displacement. Despite large-scale displacement and resultant problems created by such developmental projects, these continued to be carried out in the name of “national interest” where the tribal communities were required to suffer in the larger interest of the nation (Reddy 2003).

It becomes pertinent to mention here that it was during British rule in India that the forest department was formally established with laws and regulation ensuring their over-all control over forest resources. Recognizing the commercial value of forests, it not only became necessary for the British officials to establish their control and authority over these areas, but often required displacing forest-dependent tribal communities. This resulted in the establishment of the forest department that was backed by a regulatory and administrative set-up that ensured British control over forest resources; with this was witnessed the beginnings of large-scale displacement of tribal communities from forest areas. This mechanism and administrative set-up that was initiated during the British rule was not only retained, rather state control over forests intensified post-independence.

Commercial interests in forestlands have taken a new dimension in the contemporary neoliberal context where the market logic extends to result in greater commodification of forest lands (Harvey 2005). Moreover, the neoliberal context has marked a period of state collusion with politicians, rich industrialists, and landowners to further commercial interests at the expense of tribal and forest-dependent communities (Gadgil and Guha 1995). Among several examples such as increased commercial interests in forestry, mining activities, and tourism, the burgeoning of wildlife parks, sanctuaries, and tiger reserves deserve special mention. Beginning from the 1970s, the country has witnessed a tremendous growth in national parks, reserves, and wildlife sanctuaries, covering 5% of the total landscape by 2001 (Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006). A salient feature of these parks and reserves is that they are primarily conceptualized as inviolate spaces, implying a total absence of human population, which would enable the twin objectives of wildlife protection and environmental conservation. The embedded logic underlying such a conceptualization was locating blame for the disappearance of wildlife and environmental degradation on tribal and forest dependent communities (Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006; Greenbough 2012; Daniel and Menon 2010). The repercussions of the establishment of wildlife parks and sanctuaries on tribal communities have been profound. Not only has displacement been the underlying theme accompanying the creation of these parks and sanctuaries, it has resulted in the removal of tribal communities from their material and resource base. As a consequence, these communities have witnessed increasing number of starvation and hunger deaths, and have been forced to migrate to nearby towns and cities in search of alternative means of survival, often in the form of bonded labor¹ (Radhakrishnan 2011, Rangarajan and Shahabuddin, Negi and Ganguli 2011).

A common theme underlying colonial, post-colonial, and neoliberal contexts of control over and use of forestland and resources, is the intensification of state control in each period with simultaneous alienation of tribal and forest-dependent communities from their homelands. A discussion of some of the salient criticisms/critiques raised against development discourse pursued by the Indian state toward tribal communities helps situate this preoccupation of the state in which displacement of communities features so significantly.

The national project of economic development was accompanied with an acknowledgement of the long-term socio-economic marginalization faced by tribal communities in India. As a result, numerous constitutional, administrative, and legislative measures, which could contribute toward tribal development were undertaken to overcome this historic

¹This has been reported in several online citations such as different newspaper clippings and letters submitted by concerned organizations: <http://www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/0603UIND-Chenchu-e.pdf>
<https://www.causes.com/causes/200051/updates/230887>
<http://www.hindu.com/2010/06/14/stories/2010061460550600.htm>
<http://www.hindu.com/2009/04/30/stories/2009043050360100.htm>

oppression. Approaches to tribal development have however been described as “internal colonialism” representing a mere transfer of power from the “white man” to the “brown” (Venkateswar 2005; Xaxa 2011). This highlights the colonial “entanglements” (Sivaramakrishnan 1995) in post-colonial statehood where tribal governance is determined and influenced by the State’s motivations to assert control over tribal lands and resources. Moreover, state policies and programs toward tribal development have been described as a “second agenda” that hides the primary motivations of the state, which is to limit the extent of forests available to the people and transferring control of the same to the state (Venkateswar 2005: 23). Couched in a unilinear evolutionary language, tribal development imposes notions of backwardness on tribal communities, thereby justifying displacement of tribal communities from these “backward” areas and associated ways of life as a step toward “development”. Not only do these conceptions construct a reality of tribal communities that is essentialized, and far removed from their lived experiences (Mitchell 1990; Srivastava 2008), they view displacement of communities from their homelands as central to tribal “development.” This has been critiqued as dependency creation wherein the state removes communities from their material base, thereby reducing them from a context of relative autonomy to one of utmost dependence on the state for their survival (Sivaprasad 2001; Sivaprasad 2008).

Two factors become poignant in the critique of tribal development contextualized within the politics of control over, and use of forestlands and resources. First, tribal development is made subservient to the interests and development of the nation as a whole. Second, tribal development implicitly suggests the displacement of tribal communities from their traditional homelands due to notions of “backwardness” associated with the socio-geographic space occupied by tribal communities. Given the broad framework of tribal development in India, where displacement from traditional lands and resources is deeply intertwined to the logic of development, how does one reconcile growing concerns over the loss and erosion of indigenous knowledge with this? More importantly, how can these two seemingly contradictory outcomes be achieved at the same time: One that necessitates the displacement of tribal communities from their resource base, and the other, which requires the very resource base for the survival and continuance of knowledge systems? In order to better understand this contradiction, I will elaborate on the growing confluence of interests over indigenous knowledge, concerns over impending loss and erosion, and existing efforts toward preserving the same.

While there is no universally accepted definition for the term indigenous knowledge (IK), a widely accepted one is provided by Berkes who defines it as “...a cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (1999). A concept that had largely been dismissed as irrational and superstitious, there has been growing interest in IK since the beginning of 1970s. There are both, romantic and practical reasons surrounding this resurgence of interest. The romantic reasons are borne out of what Ellen calls “the sixties counter culture, with the notion that traditional, indigenous or ‘primitive’ peoples are in some kind of idyllic harmony with nature” (Ellen and Harris 2005:13). As for practical reasons, IK is seen as significant not just for indigenous people, but through extension, for several other interest groups including developmental organizations, organizations concerned with biodiversity conservation, and pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies to name a few. An overarching theme used in existing literature to describe this reemergence of interest is in identifying the use of IK as a replacement for existing top-bottom approaches to development. We therefore find burgeoning literature that emphasize a shift to participatory models of

development in which issues of knowledge loss are addressed while simultaneously facilitating the development where communities participate in the decision making process (Sillitoe et.al 1998; Sillitoe 1998; Sillitoe 2000).

While it is not the intent of this paper to engage in a critique of participatory development that incorporates IK, it is essential to allude to these criticisms for two purposes: one, to acknowledge some of the basic problems identified with participatory models of development; and two, to establish a basic conundrum which has not been discussed in these critiques, but one that I confronted in my field research.

Not only have participatory development models that incorporate the voice of indigenous communities been criticized for reducing IK to a static body of de-contextualized “principles” to be applied to a problem; more importantly, these criticisms allude to existing power differentials that are not acknowledged in these efforts. Echoing the critique raised in the Indian context of tribal development, participatory developmental models are also condemned for ultimately being a means for asserting greater control over communities in order to gain control over their knowledge and resources (Li 2007; McGregor 2005; Nadasdy 2005.). While these critiques rightly point to the controlling nature of participatory development, they do not provide scope to understand how issues of IK loss can be addressed when development inherently implies displacement of communities from their material and resource base. This is a basic conundrum I faced in my field research wherein, on the one hand the Chenchu community was being displaced from their traditional homelands justified on grounds of “developmental” efforts (albeit the Tiger Reserve which was conceptualized as “inviolable” in this case was the primary need for displacement); on the other hand, IK loss occurs in the very context where communities are displaced from the socio-geographic context in which knowledge operates and has meaning. This conundrum is further complicated by the growing apathy demonstrated by the Chenchu toward their tribal identity. In order to better understand the existing conundrum I proceed to discuss the Chenchu displacement, its effects on their ethnomedical knowledge, and how the Chenchu perceive the changes in their lives following displacement.

Methodology and Design

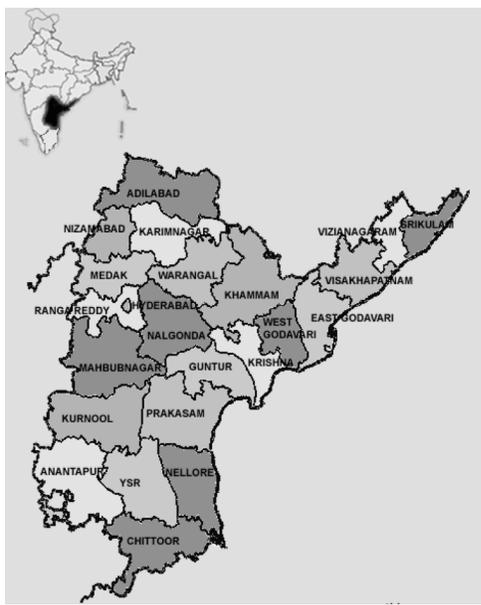


Fig. 1: Andhra Pradesh on the Map of India

This research was undertaken in 2009 as partial fulfillment of my Master’s degree requirement at the University of Hyderabad, India. This was a month-long fieldwork project conducted between the months of November and December in two Chenchu settlements, or *guddems* – Thirunampally and Narlapur – which are located in the Mehboobnagar district of Andhra Pradesh (see fig. 1). For the purpose of this paper I will focus my discussion on the Chenchu of Narlapur. Primarily an ethnographic study, my field research aimed at investigating continuity and change in the Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge following their physical displacement. A significant objective of the study was to understand how issues of knowledge loss and erosion could be addressed given the context of displacement. The study proceeded through three broad phases - A pre-

fieldwork literature review phase, the fieldwork phase, and a post-fieldwork analysis phase.

In the pre-fieldwork phase detailed review of literature was undertaken on (i) tribal governance in colonial, post-colonial and contemporary neoliberal contexts, exploring parallels and continuities in the same; (ii) existing conceptualizations of IK along with challenges and concerns confronting the same; (iii) colonial and post-colonial contexts of the Chenchu in order to understand the pre-displacement periods to contrast with the post-displacement period. The literature review helped conceptualize my field research and identify issues to be investigated.

The fieldwork phase, which began toward the end of November 2009, was initiated through generating a baseline of the village during the first week. This helped in establishing a rapport with the community, while simultaneously explaining the purpose of my research and reiterating their voluntary participation in the same. My investigation into continuity and change in Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge was undertaken through an exploration of three broad domains:

- (i) Chenchu knowledge of the Nallamalai forest with an emphasis on knowledge of medicinal plants found in the forest. This exploration was undertaken to understand how displacement affected their relationship with the forest and their dependence on the plants found in these regions.
- (ii) Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge: A detailed investigation was made into Chenchu illness etiologies, as well as the different illnesses and conditions treated by their ethnomedical practitioner. Here too a comparison was made of the pre-displacement period with that of post-displacement in terms of the illnesses that continued to be recognized, which illnesses were treated using Chenchu ethnomedicine, and where Chenchu healing ceased to be pursued.
- (iii) Investigation into Chenchu health-care choices to understand biomedicine's influence into Chenchu life following displacement. This exercise was carried out to identify the illnesses for which the Chenchu continue to use ethnomedical treatment. When did they choose to use biomedicine, and why?

An exploration of these three broad domains illuminated the ways in which Chenchu knowledge was affected by their displacement, along with an understanding of how the Chenchu viewed these changes.

In order to explore the themes outlined above, I made use of qualitative methods, primarily engaging in the anthropological tradition of participant observation. This was complemented with semi-structured interviews, informal focus group discussions, and collecting oral narratives. Special emphasis in this direction was given to Chenchu elders, the Chenchu ethnomedical practitioner, and Chenchu youth. The Chenchu elders and ethnomedical practitioner helped highlight the changes in contemporary Chenchu lives through a comparison of the times pre-displacement. Chenchu youth helped highlight the trajectory that the Chenchu inclined towards in the future. The prime aim of administering the methods was to elicit people's perceptions of change and the way they envisioned their life in the context post-displacement. People's responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim, which were later analyzed in the post-fieldwork phase.

In the post-fieldwork analysis phase, broad trends and patterns were drawn out from fieldwork findings and examined against existing literature. Based on newly gained insight and perspective from fieldwork I compiled and analyzed my observations to write up my initial thesis.

Findings

The Displacement: Context and Significance

Traditionally a hunter-gatherer community, the Chenchu of Andhra Pradesh have lived in the Nallamalai forests,² considering it their homeland for millennia (Raju, S., Sudhakar, C., and Umamohan 2009: 168). During pre-independence period, this area was jointly controlled by the British and the rulers of the then chiefly state of Hyderabad. It was the hunting ground for the royal family and their guests. Hunting activities continued unabashed in the times following independence till about the 1970s. In April 1973, responding to the dwindling number of tigers in the country, “Project Tiger”, a forty million rupee scheme, was formally launched, inaugurating the world’s largest wildlife conservation project at that time (Rangarajan 2012). This resulted in the burgeoning of numerous tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries throughout the country. During this period, the Nallamalai was also declared a protected area (1978), with the formal establishment of the Nallamalai Srisailem Tiger Reserves, the largest tiger reserve in India, in 1983. Not only did the establishment of the reserve officially ban the hunting and killing of tigers, it also necessitated the forced evacuation of a number of Chenchu inhabiting the regions that fell within the area.

Thus, beginning since 1978 the Chenchu have, and continue to be displaced from their homeland due to the establishment of the Nallamalai Srisailem Tiger Reserve. As compensation for displacement, the Chenchu were relocated to new settlements, and provided with two acres agricultural land per nuclear family and *pakka*³ houses, which was justified by the government as a stepping-stone toward the Chenchu “progress and development.” Geographical displacement has resulted in a number of visible changes in the lives of the Chenchu. Not only do the Chenchu not live in the relative isolation they once did, government and non-governmental interventions into their lives has become a norm. Through the combined efforts of these agencies, there is greater pressure to send children out to boarding schools to receive formal education; migration to nearby towns and cities in search of unskilled labor has become common among the Chenchu, exposing them to town and city life, as well as the influences of modern media, communication and infrastructure.

For a group of people who have been referred to as “Jungle Folk” (Haimendorf 1943) and “Children of the Forest”⁴, the greatest change affecting the Chenchu life following their displacement, is their changed primary dependence on agriculture today. As was recounted during fieldwork in the Chenchu narrative and reflected in their material culture can be witnessed a reduced dependence on the forests, and increased sustenance derived from agriculture.

Given this overall context I proceed to discuss my research findings on continuity and change in Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge following their physical displacement. Furthermore, I discuss how the Chenchu perceive the changes in their lives following displacement, with majority of the Chenchu describing the changes in positive terms.

Ethnomedical Knowledge – Continuity and Change

The term ethnomedicine may be defined as “beliefs and practices related to diseases which are the products of indigenous cultural development and are not explicitly derived from the conceptual framework of modern medicine” (Brown et.al 2009: 9). Every community has their

²The Nallamalai forests are spread out over five districts of Andhra Pradesh – Mehboobnagar, Guntoor, Nalagonda, Prakasam and Kurnoo – which also happen to be the traditional homelands of the Chenchu community.

³Houses made from concrete and bricks

⁴This is the title given to the Chenchu by a man named Satya Mohan, who made a documentary film on the life of the Chenchu - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCG6DfjxJYw>.

own conceptions of health and illness as well as ways of treating various health conditions. As a domain within the overall concept of indigenous knowledge, ethnomedical knowledge also operates, and has meaning within a specific socio-geographic context. How does displacement of a community from their socio-geographic context affect their ethnomedical knowledge? In order to understand this phenomenon, I explore the Chenchu case through an examination of (i) Chenchu's knowledge and perception of the forest with a special focus on their knowledge of medicinal plants found in the forest; (ii) Illnesses recognized by the Chenchu along with illness etiologies; and (iii) Chenchu health care choices in the period following displacement.

Forests have always occupied a place of great significance in the lives of the Chenchu. Being a hunter-gatherer community, older Chenchu subsisted on resources from these forests for majority of their lives. In a popular fable about the Chenchu, it is said that the term "Chenchu" means a person who lives under a *chettu* or tree (Raju, S., Sudhakar, C., and Umamoham 2009: 168). When asked how they view the forests all the Chenchu responded by saying, "*the forest is our talli* (or mother)". They refer to the forest as *adavitalli* (forest mother). This is true especially among the Chenchu elders, who continue to hold the forest with an attitude of reverence and fear.

As discussed before, displacement has altered Chenchu's relationship with the forest, and reduced their dependency on the same. Through a combination of participant observation during visits made to the forest along with Chenchu, and semi-structured interviews on Chenchu perception and dependence on the forest it was found that forests today have been relegated to a place of secondary importance. With agriculture becoming their primary occupation, supplemented with seasonal migration to towns and cities in search of unskilled labor, the Chenchu's association with the forest is limited to the collection of minor forest products like honey, gum, tamarind, *mohua* flowers to name a few, and occasional hunting for leisure. More significant is to mention the decreasing knowledge of forest in successive generations. While the generation of middle-aged Chenchu actively possess knowledge of the forest and the different plants and animals found (along with diverse uses of the same), the youth neither have the opportunity, nor the inclination to learn about the forest. During one of my visits to the forest with some Chenchu community members, I requested that they explain the names and uses of various medicinal plants found in the forests. While the Chenchu were able to list out the names and uses of several medicinal plants found in the forest, observation of actual use of these plants during my research period was negligible. Their knowledge of medicinal plants represented the category of "knowledge without use" (Nesheim et.al 2006) where knowledge is not absolutely lost, but is in the process of being lost due to government and non-governmental valorization of biomedicine. It is pertinent to mention that this group mainly comprised middle-aged Chenchu men.

An investigation into illnesses recognized and Chenchu ethnomedical etiologies of these illnesses was undertaken primarily through a semi-structured interview with the Chenchu ethnomedical practitioner. Through my interview I enquired into where the practitioner received his wisdom, descriptions of various illnesses recognized and continued to be treated by him, along with a reflection of the changes experienced since displacement. Through his responses I learned that the Chenchu continue to express illnesses according to ethnomedical etiologies, attributing illnesses to spirit possessions and the *evil eye* of a jealous individual. Most Chenchu continue to seek his treatment for minor illnesses, spirit possessions, and scorpion or snake bites. This was also reflected by most Chenchu community members when they were asked to describe their health-care choices through informal group discussions. During these sessions, the Chenchu

described how they sought the ethnomedical practitioner's advice for minor ailments, while preferred to go to private clinics in nearby towns and cities to address more severe illnesses.

It is noteworthy that the ethnomedical practitioner alone has in-depth healing knowledge and does not intend to pass on his knowledge to any of the community members. When asked why, he responded by saying that he had not found anyone worthy of passing on the tradition to. It is important to note that although he was afraid to pass the knowledge on to someone who might misuse this knowledge to earn economic benefits, none of the youth interviewed displayed any interest in learning the same.

An exploration of continuity and change in the Chenchu ethno-medical knowledge following displacement therefore reveals, that while knowledge is not absolutely lost, the current context provides ample scope for complete erosion. In this context, it also becomes significant to reflect on the ways in which Chenchu perceive the changes in their lives following displacement. While a handful of Chenchu elders within the community demonstrate a sense of nostalgia and loss, the overarching sentiments are positive portrayals of Chenchu life resulting from physical displacement. Not only do the Chenchu express how their lives are more secure due to their changed dependence on agriculture, most Chenchu describe a life that is forest-dependent as dangerous and uncertain. Significantly, while the Chenchu describe a movement to agriculture as more secure, they describe their life in the village as one of poverty and unhappiness. The general sentiment is that it is ultimately a movement toward the city where the Chenchu will find ultimate happiness. As the following excerpt of an interview with a Chenchu youth illustrates:

MN: *Why do you want to move to the city?*

Chenchu Youth: *What is there in this village? Nothing but poverty and unhappiness. The real life and happiness can only be found in cities. That's why I want to go there*

MN: *Don't you feel proud about being a Chenchu? Don't you think you can stay here and improve the conditions here?*

Chenchu Youth: *Absolutely not! I don't wish to be associated with being a Chenchu – someone who lives in the forests, hunts or climbs trees – I don't believe I can do anything to make this place better. I don't want to stay here.*

This attitude of the Chenchu youth which combines a desire to move to the city with a rejection of Chenchu identity is encouraged by the middle generation of Chenchu. Expressed in the representative words of one of the Chenchu community members, *What is there to their life in this village? Only poverty. If they leave they can secure a good job, earn more money and live a better life than the kind they would have in the village.*

Two significant issues are revealed through my field research. One, the potential for complete loss of Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge following their physical displacement, which echoes the global concerns of knowledge loss; two, an induced desire among the Chenchu to not only move away to the city, but more importantly, to dissociate from their Chenchu identity. In order to engage with these two issues I move on to discuss the same within the larger context of the development discourse of tribal development in India. There are some crucial questions that the Chenchu case advances: What repercussions does this growing apathy signify for concerns toward preserving indigenous knowledge systems; how can knowledge preservation be achieved

when there is growing desire among the Chenchu to move away from the context where knowledge operates and has meaning? And most importantly, what are the larger processes that influence the Chenchu to develop apathy toward their own identity, and their desire to move away to the cities to “find happiness?” In order to engage with these questions more meaningfully, I proceed to discuss the same within the larger development discourse in which Chenchu “development” has proceeded.

Discussion

When I initiated fieldwork among the Chenchu, the objective of my research was to identify levels of continuity and change in the Chenchu ethnomedical knowledge with an aim to understand how issues of knowledge loss can be addressed. However, my research revealed a basic conundrum: On the one hand it was evident that knowledge loss was taking place at a rapid pace due to Chenchu displacement from the forest. This is further aggravated by the Chenchu desire to move away to the city and dissociate from their Chenchu way of life; On the other hand, displacement of Chenchu from their forest homelands is valorized by the dominant discourse as being central to their progress. How can knowledge be preserved when the Chenchu are being removed from the context in which knowledge operates and has meaning? How is this to be reversed when the Chenchu demonstrate a desire to move to the city along with growing apathy toward their identity? How are issues of knowledge loss to be addressed when displacement from the forest and mobility toward cities becomes synonymous with development?

Central to these issues is the development discourse undertaken by the Indian state toward tribal communities – one that was initiated in the post-independence period, but has some obvious parallels with the colonial period, and continues into the contemporary neoliberal contexts. One of the most pertinent criticisms of the existing development discourse undertaken by the Indian state toward tribal development has been the overarching concern with gaining control over the forest lands and resources on which these communities subsist. Therefore, tribal development has been condemned by scholars as disguising the real motivations that underlie the same. This not only explains why displacement of tribal communities from forest lands has featured as a necessity for development, couched in a unilinear evolutionary term forest dependence has been portrayed as “backward” while a movement to agriculture has been fostered as a step toward “development.” As a result, the often involuntary displacement of these communities is projected by the state as a paternalistic necessity, thereby reducing resistance from communities against their displacement and helping establish control over forest lands and resources, devoid of these communities’ presence and interference.

The establishment of the Nallamalai Srisailem Tiger Reserves has witnessed, among other things, the increasing displacement of Chenchu who have inhabited these areas for millennia. This displacement has however been presented to the Chenchu as a necessary precondition for their development. As a result, not only has the displacement of the Chenchu altered their relationship with the forest, it has also resulted in a changed rhetoric among Chenchu toward forest-dependence. We therefore find that the forest is now often described as dangerous and subsistence that is forest-dependent as uncertain. Simultaneously, we find a valorizing of the agricultural way of life as being safer and more secure. This is particularly ironic given the risky nature of agriculture in drought prone areas of Andhra Pradesh which has

witnessed increased rates of farmer suicides in recent times.⁵ Significantly, a way of life dependent on agriculture is seen by the state as cross-road for the Chenchu that helps them move away from their “backward” hunter-gatherer way of life and facilitates their movement to the “progressive” city.

This brings us back to the central question of this paper which is, *how can issues of knowledge loss or erosion be addressed when many like the Chenchu no longer wish to identify with their traditional ways of life?* Within the existing paradigm of development in the Indian context where displacement features as a prominent rhetoric toward the idea of progress and development, issues of knowledge loss become aggravated. Because knowledge operates within a specific socio-geographic context, in order for knowledge to perpetuate itself and have meaning this context of operation becomes crucial. Removal from this context poses a threat for the continuance of knowledge. The Chenchu study therefore reveals that within the existing framework of development discourse undertaken toward tribal development, issues of knowledge loss cannot be addressed substantially. There needs to be a paradigm shift in the way development is envisaged and the way in which the development project proceeds. However, it becomes difficult to envision how this paradigm shift can take place when the principal concern of the Indian state appears to be asserting greater control over forestlands and resources. While it is not within the scope of this paper to explore how this paradigm shift can take place, it is pertinent to point to that fact that concerns over forest resources have been, and continue to be, central to the Indian state. Not only does this central concern complicate issues of knowledge loss, but more importantly, it threatens the existence of communities such as the Chenchu who in their wish to dissociate from their tribal identity, aspire to move to the city in search of what they believe to be a better life. Again, while it is not within the scope of this paper to explore the consequences of movement to the city, it becomes pertinent to mention some of the issues facing Chenchu, which is not disconnected from their displacement from forestlands. Agricultural dependence has proven to be inadequate to significantly fend for the Chenchu; Seasonal migration in search of unskilled labor has become the norm. Often, due to lack of alternatives, the Chenchu are forced into indentured labor where they face serious discrimination and exploitation. Therefore the current development discourse perpetuates the very marginalization it promises to do away with.

Conclusion

Through a discussion of the Chenchu displacement from the Nallamalai forest, this paper has discussed the effects of physical displacement on the ethnomedical knowledge of the community. Moreover, I have discussed how the Chenchu view the changes in their lives following displacement favorably thereby demonstrating a wish to dissociate from their Chenchu identity. Through an elaborate discussion of the development discourse toward tribal communities in India I have demonstrated an inherent problem with the current development discourse. Not only is displacement of communities from their traditional homelands featured as an integral path toward development, moreover, couched in a unilinear evolutionary language, the current discourse imposes ideas of backwardness onto these communities which thereby explains their growing apathy towards their tribal identity, and tribal ways of life. The main

⁵This has been reported in the following online citations: <http://indiatogether.org/farmdie-op-ed>;
<http://www.hindu.com/2006/03/16/stories/2006031607401100.htm>;
<http://indiatogether.org/farmdie-op-ed>

purpose of my paper has been to challenge the current development discourse toward tribal development, which perpetuates the very marginalization it promises to do away with.

While this paper discusses only the Chenchu example, numerous tribal communities are facing similar issues throughout the Indian sub-continent. Within contemporary neoliberal contexts has been witnessed heightened concerns by the Indian state over the control of forest resources surpassing that of colonial and post-colonial times; Expansion of industrial and commercial activities in forest lands, increasing growth of tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries responding to the growing impetus from ecotourism are few among several examples that exemplify the same. This heightened interest in forest lands and increased commodification of the same within neoliberal contexts further complicates the issue of tribal “development” which it seems will continue to be made subservient to the larger interests of the Indian nation. While it may be difficult to envision a paradigm shift in the development discourse that keeps tribal communities at the forefront of decision making, this is quintessential to check growing marginalization of tribal communities which stems from the growing desire of the Indian state to control forest land and resources.

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