Chapter – VIII

ETHNOGRAPHIC PARALLELS – URA CHENCHUS
Ethnographic analogy is also used to develop models for describing and interpreting settlement data. The investigation of how living societies are distributed across the landscape can be especially useful for reconstructing ancient human behaviors that are not the direct result of economizing behavior or for relationships that are not easily quantifiable. For example, the spatial organization of religious activity or ethnic organization can be investigated by deriving archaeological models from ethnographic cases that describe how cosmological symbols or ethnic markers are distributed across the landscape. Although ethnographic analogy possesses its own set of problems and assumptions, it can enhance the archaeologist’s understanding of the range of possible settlement behavior.

Chenchus are one of the original tribes of Andhra Pradesh chiefly spread in the Nallamalay’s of Guntur, Krishna, Kurnool and Khammam districts. A greater part of them settled down in the plains are now doing the jobs such as farmers or as farm labourers (Stephen Fuchs 1973). But a number of chenchus who are living in the interior forests are still leading a nomadic life subsisting purely on the collection of vegetable food stuffs in the jungle and on hunting wild animals. They hunt with bows and also set up traps. They are accomplished fishermen.

An ecological meaning is sought to be attributed to the word ‘Chenchu’ by interpreting that a person who lives under a ‘Chettu’ (Tree) is a Chenchu (Aiyappan; 1948 : 148). They connect their origin with the Lord
According to the Chenchus of Guntur, Krishna, Kurnool and Khammam districts, the tribe can be broadly divided into four groups. They are:


2. Konda Chenchus . . found in the Nallamali forest of Kurnool, Khammam and Krishna districts.

3. Chenchu Dasari . . found in Kurnool district.

4. Ura Chenchus . . found in settled way of life in Guntur, Krishna, and Khammam districts.

The urachenchus are formerly known as konda chenchus. Since they have left their original abodes ‘Kondalu’ (hills) and are now residing ‘Urulu’ (Villages) they are called as urachenchus. The time at which this transformation took place is not known but on the basis of the differences in the economy of these groups it is not be wrong to assume that the difference took place in the remote past. In the economy, there exists a vast difference among the urachenchus and the other groups. While the urachenchus subsist mostly on mixed economy based on the food collection and food production, the other groups are still in the stage of food collection. Further the Koyachenchus, Kondachenchus and Chenchu Dasari mix among themselves especially in matrimonial and other alliances, Urachenchus on the other hand maintain their own separate identity and do not have any alliances such as matrimonial etc., with
the other groups. The present chapter mainly deals with the life of Urachenchus of Guntur, Krishna and Khammam districts as these tribal people show similarities in the economy and other material effects as those of Neolithic communities and succeeding early farming cultures.

**Physical Characteristics:**

About the appearance of chenchus, Haimendorf et. al. (1943:17) writes, “In general the chenchi is of slender, medium stature, the average height of the men being 163 cms and though there are many men under 155 cm. The colour of the skin varies from dark black brown to a rich copper colour. The eyes are generally brown and sometimes black. The strong coarse hair is wavy or curly and there are a few individuals with hair so tightly curled that from a distance it appears almost frizzly. The facial growth is not very strong and at the most men have sprouting beards and moustaches. Some men have hardly any but public hair on the body while other have a curly growth on chest, arms and legs” (PL. 2.B).

**Dwelling, food, dress and other Material objects:** The migrations of chenchus although still present in Koya chenchus, Konda chenchus etc., in the interior forests, the Urachenchus living in Palnad, Nandigama and Badrachalam Taluks respectively in Guntur, Krishna and Khammam districts have their settlements either at the edges of forests or in the plains. One of the guiding factors for Urachenchus settlement is the availability of water, edible plants, tubers, arable lands and grazing grounds (Pl. 1:A).
Dwellings:

Urachenchus traditionally live in conical and oblong huts. The hut is small and compact. It is erected by the owners with the assistance of their kith and kin (Pl.1:C). The required materials for raising the huts are procured freely from the forests. They do not observe any formality regarding the selection of a site for construction of the house. After selecting the site, they mark off a fairly elevated circular area about 10 to 12 feet in diameter and then erect on the same a central pole. Along the periphery of the circular area of the hut they fix short poles of about four feet in height. Those side posts are then connected with the central pole by bamboo pieces. The walls are usually made with wattle with thin bamboo splinters. The roof is laid with the help of forest thatch which they themselves collect from the forest.

They usually keep 50 yards distance between one house to the other. The grouping of huts is invariably based on kinship pattern. Close relatives like brothers and cousins build their huts very near to each other.

Organisation of Huts:

No definite pattern is followed by the urachenchus in internal arrangement of their huts. Only a few huts are divided into two parts with a ‘thatti’ (bamboo screen). The houses are almost empty except for a few earthen utensils for cooking, storing and other materials. Cattle and sheep are generally kept in a conical huts which are specially built for accommodating them. Urachenchus, generally keep inside portion of their huts clean and periodically
sweep and smear with cow dung. The hearth consists of three stones kept together over a small hollow pit located in the northern corner of the house. Domestic utensils are arranged close to the hearth. A cot prepared with bamboos is the other material equipment generally present in the rich and affluent people of chenchus.

Dress:

It is true, even today that some of the ura chenchus dress very scanty. Mammal (1886:123) made the following observation on the type of dress they used to wear in the past. “The men are nearly in a state of nudity, having only a piece of cloth around their lions. The women dress more decently than men, in the style of wondering female basket-makers, and reasonable in features similar to their neighbours, the Telugu people of the plains”. Thurston (1909:37) observes that some chenchus bear on the head a cap made of wax cloth, deer or have skin. The hair of head is tied into a bunch behind. Leafy garments have been replaced by white lion clothes and some of the women have adapted the ‘ravika’ (bodice) in imitation of the female costume in the plains. Haimendorf et. al. (1943:25) observes that male chenchus wear ‘gochi batta’ (pl.2:B) and females wear ‘ravika’ (Pl. 1:B).

Ornaments:

Generally speaking men do not wear any ornament except small rings made or brass. The ornaments of women are very few and composed of a few chains of coloured beads, copper/brass made lobs of the ear, spiral rings etc.
‘Mukkupudaka’ made of aluminium are also worn on one of the nostrils (Thurston 1909:123).

**Food:**

They eat cholam, ragi, and millet. They usually floor them and prepare roti (bread) and eat them with a ‘Chutney made of chillis’. They also eat flesh of all animals killed in chase except tiger, cheetah and wolf.

Except in a rare occasion they do not boil the meat but heat it over the fire and eat (Thurston 1909:124). They also eat monkeys and during the summer lizard gerana (Udumu). The different tubers they boil and eat include chunchugadda, Urragadda, Nulagadda, thamoregadda and Kalvagadda. All these form part of the family of Discoreaceae which has more than 600 species distributed across the tropical belt. They also use for eating purposes, different leaves which include Devadaru leaves, boddaku, chenchakulu, pendlipedda kura, Pullakura etc., besides seasonal fruits such as konda ethapandlu, Velagapandlu, Kallekkayalu, Konda Jama etc.

The eating procedure of hunted animal among the ura chenchus is interesting. First the animal is skinned and cut into four or five big pieces and heated over fire. But sometimes after skinning the animal they pierce a long stick through the stomach and heat it over the fire by catching the two ends of the stick. After heating it, they cut the roasted animal into pieces and eat it with salt and chilli powder.
They generally take food twice a day. The morning meal called ‘Udaya bhojanam’ is usually taken in the morning and the following meal or the ‘mapatibhojanam’ is taken in the evening. The morning meal generally consists of Samkati (a kind of gruel) prepared with jowar and karam (chillis) and some may take rice gruel with salt. The evening meal consists of roti (bread) prepared out of jowar flour, taken with salt, chillis, tamarind and onion. It is observed that during the morning or evening meal all the members of household sit together and have their meal.

Drinks:

For many of the Chenchu’s the day will never be complete without country made drink. Both the wife and the husband take the drink which is usually prepared from Mahua flower (Bassia latifolia) and occasionally made out of tumma chekka and jaggery. Further, it is observed that every household had a distillery of its own (Thurston 1909 : 126)

Domestic vessels and implements:

The domestic utensils consists of a few metal and earthern pots such as sarava (used for cooking gruel), kura sarava (used for preparing pulusu or curry) and Neela kaduava (earthen pot used for fetching water or storing water). Besides these alluminium plates and glasses are used for eating and drinking purposes. Other articles of domestic use like rolu (mortor), rokali (Pestle) and tirugale (grinding stone) are also found in majority of households (Pl.2:A).
Language:

The Ura Chenchus speak Telugu with an intonation of their own which sometimes sounds harsh but pointed and tense in its finish and it thus appear as though they speak their own language. Mr. Newill (1857:202) is of the opinion that “the chenu tribe whose language is almost entirely corrupt Hindi and Urdu with a few exceptions from Bengali affords one more example to the many forth coming of an uncultured race having abandoned their own tongue”.

Economic life:

The Urachenchus economy is mixed and supported by food collection and food production. They used to roam in the forest, collect wild tubers, green leaves and honey and occasionally hunt wild animals. However, they had hardly developed any technique of preservation of food. The industrial classification of 1961 census show that as many as 60.48% of urachenchus are engaged either in cultivation or agriculture labour. The remaining chenchus are engaged in other works such as mining and quarrying, household industry, manufacturing, construction etc.

Cultivation:

Though cultivation by plough was not in vogue among the Urachenchus, cultivation by dibbling method is in existence among them for generations. For their traditional cultivation, usually they select a plot of land near their ‘gudem’ where cattle herds were tended during the previous season. The land is cleared by plucking grass and weeds and scraping the earth with
bamboo scrapers. The plot is then fenced with bamboo pieces for protection of the crops from cattle and other animals. At the time of sowing the person concerned moves in straight line making holes at regular distance from one another with a digging stick and dropping seeds of Jowar, millet and other corns in the holes.

The other method is ploughing the land and rising the crops. This of course is a new phenomenon among chenchus and hence they are not very effective in this type of cultivation. However, the Urachenchus because of their association with the civilized people in the villages are gradually adopting this new technique. They use draught animals such as oxen for tilling the soil. They also prepare their backyards for growing climbers and produce beans etc. These beams are generally used for the preparation of curries. They usually store grain in big bamboo baskets or pots. Some of the important tools the Urachenchus use during the cultivation are as follows:

1. **Dokudu Para**: It consists of a flat iron piece with sharp working edge. It is secured to a long bamboo shaft 70-90 cm long by inserting the posterior end into one end of the handle through an iron ferrule. It is used while working in the plantations to loosen the soil and remove weeds.

2. **Karapara**: It consists of a strong iron rod of about 3 cm length fixed to a fairly thick bamboo shaft of 70-90 cms in length. It is used for loosening the surface of the ground and digging out roots and tubers which form part of their food.
3. **Kathi** : It is a hatchet with a strong broad iron blade fixed to a short handle and is used for cutting bamboos and splitting them. It is also used for skinning wild animals.

4. **Kodavali** : It is an iron sickle used for cutting grass and other connected agricultural operations.

5. **Goddali** : It is a common axe as found elsewhere and is used by the chenchus to clear jungle growth and hew the wood.

**Animal Husbandry** :

Ura Chenchus domesticate the animals like sheep, goat, cattle etc. The oxen and cow are rared only by affluent people. They usually construct separate conical round shaped sheds for sheep and goat. But for the cow and buffaloes, separate pens are constructed with bamboos. They do not normally store fodder for the animal as their dwellings are close to the water sources where enough fodder is naturally available. If the surroundings go empty during the summer, they take the animals to the forests to feed them. They usually start with their animal in the morning and come back to their gudem kottams in the evening.

**Collection of honey** :

Collection of honey is one of the most fascinating activities for ura chenchus, though there exhibits some element of danger. They recognize five varieties of honey found in the Nallamalai forest. They are Pedda Para, Thodili, Juntithene, Musuru and Kannagula. Of these Juntithena is very tasty whereas
Kannegula is used in the preparation of medicines. The chenchus sell a major part of the honey collected by them either in the nearby village or to the local co-operative store.

**Collection of YAMS** : They usually collect different species of yams and other roots some of which are seasonal whereas the others are available year round. ‘Iron tipped digging stick ‘Karrapara’ is the implement used for the purpose. Both the man and women go in groups for the collection of yams in the morning and while the women return to their ‘gudems’ in the evening, men stay away there to four days at a stretch to explore the find spots of the yams. (*Coon*; 1972:159) Urachenchus who are living at the fringes of the forests still practice the collection of yams

**Collection of Ippa flower** :

Besides honey, chenchus are experts in the collection of ‘ippa’ flower (Mahua flower : Bassia latifolia) which is used in liquor preparation. The flowering season for Mahua tree is cleared by burning it so that the corollas of (rings of plant) tree starts during April-May. Prior to the onset of the season, the ground below the mahua could be picked up easily. Some eat it fresh while the other dry it and prepare liquor by boiling and fermenting it (*Coon* 1972:159). They keep a part of ippa flower for their domestic consumption and sell the remaining in the near by villages.
Hunting:

Urachenches are not experts in hunting, although every chenchu participate in hunting on some special occasions. Their game consists of birds such as jungle fowl, peacock, doves etc., rabbits and other small animals. Meat does not form a regular item of their food except now and then when they go for hunting. The main hunting equipment consists of bow and arrow and nets. Bow is usually made of split bamboo tied with strong card made out of deer or sheep sinew, while the arrow consists of a thin strong bamboo stick with an iron point at one end and feathers on the other. Two different arrows are used such as ‘Goraka’ to shot small animal and birds and ‘Ombu’ for killing bigger animal like Panther and tiger etc. They also uses traps made of nets and slab stones connected with small sticks to catch birds (fig. 2:C).

Religion: The most important deity is Lord Mallikarjuna of Srisailam. They also call Him as Lingamayya (Lord Eswara). During the month of Sravan (July-August) each Chenchu household erect a small stone in their fields and sacrifices are made to this deity according to their economic status.

Chenchu’s worship a number of deities known as Bayyanna, Maisamma, Sunkalamma, Peddamma, Magulamma, and Ammatalli etc. They worship the Bayyanna to achieve success in hunting expedition. The Bayyanna deity is supposed to be an expert in archery. So whenever Chenchus go for hunting, first they go to the deity Bayyanna symbolized in a stone and either they break a coconut or sacrifice a fowl.
The female deity Maisamma is supposed to help the Chenchus in punishing their enemies. Sometimes the Chenchus threaten the deity itself with fire if she does not grant their wishes. They believe that because of the fear of fire the deity kills the enemies of Chenchus in the guise of a bear or a tiger or a snake.

The other female deities such as Sunkalamma, Peddamma, Magulamma and Ammathalli are supposed to be malevolent deities who cause disease like Cholera, Small pox and Chicken-pox. To appease them each chenchu gudem sacrifices a goat or a fowl once in a year during the month of March.

Superstitious beliefs:

Chenchus believe in luck and in superstitions. If they happen to see any animal whose flesh is edible, or a cow or dog coming without shaking the ears but shaking the tail, it is considered as good omen. If the children sneeze twice when they go on some work is also considered auspicious. Dog shaking its ears in the morning and cross a rokali (pestle) or gaddapara (crowbar) or hearing sneezing once or falling of a water pot once is considered inauspicious.

To ward off the evil effects of evil eyes, they mix turmeric powder in boiling water. If it turns red, they consider that the evil eye has effected the person and they wave the coloured water before him to ward off the evil. If the mixed water does not turn into red and assumes yellow colour, then it is believed that there is no effect of evil eye.
Another method to ward off the effect of evil eye is to put chillis, salt and hair plucked from the head into a tumbler and after waving it down the person two times each in front and back and thrown it at the center of the road by which they believe that the evil would leave the effected person.

Festivals:

The ura chenchus celebrate majority of the Hindu festivals. It is believed that they have been much influenced by the Hindus of the neighbouring villages. They celebrate Ugadi, Nagulachaviti, Dasara, Sankranti, and Sivaratri etc. On the day of the festival they sacrifice a fowl in the name of Paddanna and include it in their feastly meal.

As a special item for the festive occasion, they cook rice adding jaggery and coconut or they cook bengalgram with jaggery. Indulging in drinks in the evening by both the sexes in an essential feature. They also perform the dance known as ‘Chencheta’ (Fig.1:B) wherein both men and women stand opposite to each other and dance to the tune of dappu (a kind of drum) without a song. The musical instrument tappeta is being used for special ceremonies such as marriage etc.

Life-cycle:

The customs and traditions of ura chenchus are very much influenced by the civilized people living close by. However, they follow their own age old social customs and traditions. The chenchus consider the birth of a child as
blessing of God. No preference is given either of the sexes. They consider nausea and stoppage of menses as indication of pregnancy. No restrictions are placed on a pregnant woman with regard to diet and daily routine work. The pregnant woman works till the time she begins to complain of labour pains. Abortion is not a sin among the chenchus. The methods practiced to effect abortion are using aofetida and papai fruit in the first month of pregnancy. They also use the powder of a few herbs and leaves and mix with ganji (water of cocked rice) and take thrice a day for two days continuously.

The naming of ceremony of children among the chenchus is interesting. Sometimes they name the child even before its birth if they take a vow in the name of a deity or saint. Normally the naming ceremony takes place when the child attains 5 years of age. The male chenchu name usually ends with ‘adu’ or ‘lu’ or ‘aiah’ or ‘anna’ like Lingadu, Palankalu, Bayyanna or Chinnaiah etc. The female names terminate in amma as for instance Guravamma, Mugemma. Most of the names are derived from the deities they worship (Haimondorf:1943:148).

They are two types of marriages existing among urachenchus – marriage by negotiation locally known as ‘pelli’ and marriage by elopment termed as ‘raji’. Generally marriage within the same gotra is disallowed. Cross-cousin marriage is in vogue. Chenchu widow generally marry the brother of her deceased husband. Divorce is not infrequent among the chenchus. The divorce is allowed only if the woman goes with another man. Usually the tribal elders
sanction the divorce. At the time of divorce the woman should return all the ornaments that are presented by her former husband. The children at the best are allowed to be taken along with her only to be returned after they attain maturity.

The deceased are buried with the head oriented towards east. They practice certain type of ceremonies during burial time. The widow is peeled of her ornaments and especially the bangles. She is forced to wear only white cloth saree through out her life. This is only a practice but not a popular custom among ura chenchus. This female restrictions are in practice among certain women who has no brother to the diseased husband and or if the woman dislikes to remarry or she prefer to remain as a widow.