

# **SOCIAL CHANGE IN RENGSAANGRI 1956-1986**

**K. H. Bhat**

## **Introduction**

Long term field research is a style of doing social anthropology which began sometime in the second decade of this century. Robert Redfield and Clyde Kluckhohn were probably the first to see the importance of repeated visits to the field to gain greater knowledge of the culture and language of the people under study (Foster et al. 1979: 7). This style of field work was developed gradually over the next two to three decades by the American anthropologists. In most of the cases the study was conducted by the same anthropologist over a period of time. There are great deal of variations in long term research in terms of time-span, length of intervals between two field works, number of field workers, purpose of research and the problems of investigation. 'Restudy' is one type of long term research in which the purpose of study is to measure change. The data of the earlier field work is used as a basis to measure change. Lewis's study of Tepoztlan, about two decades after Redfield's study, is an excellent case of restudy by another anthropologist. In the present paper, an attempt is made to highlight some of the changes which took place in Rengsangri over a period of three decades. Robbins Burling, an American anthropologist, studied this village for two years, from October 1954 to October 1956. My visit, however, was very brief. I spent only four weeks in January 1987. Therefore, the observations made here are of a preliminary nature.

## **The Setting**

Rengsangri is situated 19 Kms to the north of Tura, by the side of Guwahati-Tura Highway and the Tura-Williamnagar Highway. It is one of the five

villages which form a cluster. The other four villages are Misimagri, Nokatgri, Lelbalgri and Asonangri. Burling estimated that Rengsanggri was formed around 1880 by the migration of a few families of Lelbalgri. Generally, non-heiress (chawari) daughters are the first to migrate with their husbands to form new settlements which later become villages. Traditional Garo society was divided into Marak and Sangma moieties which are again subdivided into several 'sibs'. Members of one or two sibs from each moiety own land in the village cluster. This land is called A'king or Ajikse. In Rengsanggri the village land belongs to the families of Chambugong sib of Marak moiety and Manda sib of Sangma moiety. Later, a new exogamous group called Momin was added making it impossible to speak of the moiety system among the Garos. But the people of Rengsanggri still think of their society as a dual system of moieties. In recent years two daughters of Rengsanggri married Momin boys. My informants felt that the Momins really belonged to the opposite moiety, either Sangma or Marak, depending on the moiety of the informant.

There were 60 households in 1956 distributed in three hamlets within a radius of about 800 sq.ft. The population of the village was 293. The religion of the people was Songsarek. There was no Christian in or around Rengsanggri. Burling was primarily interested in studying their kinship and social structure, especially the functions of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. He makes only a cursory reference to economy, religion and other aspects of culture. During the last thirty years, change has occurred mainly in three areas, namely, religion, economy and settlement. There are two constraints to make an objective assessment of the changes: (a) the scanty description of economic and religious life in the monograph 'Rengsanggri', and (b) the limitation of my field work which was of only four weeks duration.

## Continuity and Change

As mentioned earlier the kinship system is the least affected part of the culture. Moiety exogamy was adhered strictly to in 1956. This rule has been relaxed to some extent among Christians. Other marriage rules have not been affected much, though the marriage ceremony has undergone change. Christians and Songsareks (who follow traditional religion) participate in each other's community festivals. The matrilinear cross-cousin marriage still remains the preferred form of marriage.

Rengsanggri was about to split in 1956. The process of expansion of the settlement and the agricultural land had started. Burling had rightly identified some of the causes of migration of families: "Just a few years before my visit several households moved out of Rengsanggri. A few of the people were considering adopting Christianity and wished to live separately, while others wished to practise new techniques of agriculture and to live in a place accessible to wet rice and pineapple groves. This location was known by a different village name Asonanggri and seemed destined to become a fully separate village" (1963: 236). The prediction has come true. Now, Asonanggri is a fully developed village with all the modern amenities and institutions of life like electricity, health centre, veterinary hospital, milk dairy, community development block, school, church, and metalled road. There are 33 Christian households, out of which five households are divided from the four households listed by Burling. Out of the five households migrated from Rengsanggri since 1956, four were established by non-heiress daughters and one by an heiress daughter. There is no Songsarek household. The majority of the people in Rengsanggri were not affected by the new forces of change in 1956 as reported by Burling: "Although the people of Rengsanggri have made regular trips to the Tura market for many years,

their life seems relatively unaffected by the modern influences of the church, of school, or of new agricultural techniques" (Ibid: 24). Although the reasons for migration of people from Rengsanggri to Asonangri are Christianity and new agriculture (wet rice), the reason for migration within Rengsanggri is mainly population pressure. Other factors also accelerated the process of household fragmentation and redistribution.

The original settlement of Rengsanggri is called Rengsan Songma. All the 60 households were located here in Kamagri in 1956. The people moved in the directions where virgin land was available for cultivation. Eight more settlements have come up since 1956. Some households from other villages and Tura have also made Rengsanggri their home. The distribution of the existing 101 households is given below (the immigrant households are shown within brackets):

|     |                |       |
|-----|----------------|-------|
| 1.  | Rengsan Songma | 11(2) |
| 2.  | Kamagri        | 5(3)  |
| 3.  | Denklagri      | 6(0)  |
| 4.  | Wakhagri       | 8(3)  |
| 5.  | Khasinangri    | 14(4) |
| 6.  | Rongbilbangri  | 2(2)  |
| 7.  | Repilgri       | 14(5) |
| 8.  | Chitragri      | 6(0)  |
| 9.  | Wadrogri       | 4(0)  |
| 10. | Miksagri       | 11(0) |

In addition, one immigrant household is located by the roadside. In all, there are 20 immigrant households and 81 native households. Out of the 60 households reported by Burling, 15 daughters from 11 households emigrated to other places. Six of the households became extinct without daughters either their own or adopted. One household continued by adopting a daughter.

Shifting cultivation (jhum) was the main form of agriculture in 1956. Burling did not discuss much about wet rice cultivation and horticulture. Jhum land was distributed by the village 'nokma' (headman) during an annual meeting. Virgin lands and unused lands are taken for distribution. At present no virgin land is available in the village. The land can be classified as forest land, jhum land and wet land. Those who do not want to use the jhum land are required to give it to others (usually, kinsmen are selected) for use. This rule is not applied to wet land. The forest belongs to the community and the nokma is its custodian. In the olden days people used to claim enough jhum land which could be cultivated by the labour which was available in the household. Wage labour was not heard of in those days. But now-a-days some people engage wage labour occasionally. The payment is made in kind as well as in cash. In 1956 cotton was the only cash crop. The jhum cycle was about 8 years which has come down to about 3 to 4 years now.

The change in agricultural style is mainly due to the establishment of a Community Development Block in Asonangri in 1956. The Community Development Block became active in the early part of 1960's by introducing land development and terrace cultivation programmes. The first programme is over now and the second is still in progress. The Community Development Block has 236 villages covering a population of 29,700 distributed in 6409 households (1981 Census). It covers an area of 843 sq.kms. The Community Development Block encourages farmers in growing cash crops like pineapple, orange, areca, and pear. Several Rengsanggri households are cultivating pineapple. During the last three years 10 households were given a loan of Rs. 5,000/- each for pineapple growing and developing piggery. Recently, the State Bank of India, Tura Branch, has adopted Rengsanggri for economic development. New developmental institutions have also come up in Asonangri.

Primary Health Centre and a Veterinary Dispensary are the two important institutions which are welcomed by the people. An Anganwadi was also established in Rengsanggri in 1985. There were 22 boys and 17 girls (3-6 years) registered in the nursery in January 1987. Free food is distributed to children daily by the Anganwadi teacher.

The religious beliefs and practices have undergone the last 30 years. There was not a single Christian household in Rengsanggri in 1956. But religious change was imminent. Garo Baptist missionaries from Tura were visiting the village to preach Christianity. A few families were converted in late 1950's. The first few families shifted to new localities or villages after conversion. In the 1960's the families did not migrate after conversion. Christians are found in all the settlements among the original settlers as well as immigrants. Out of 20 immigrant households, 13 are Christians and among the 81 original households 52 are Christians and 3 are partly Christians. Many changes have taken place in the life style of the people after conversion. Christians do not use the traditional ornaments and ceremonial dress, do not drink much rice beer and most of them do not live in thatched houses. They get married in the presence of the Christian priest who is invited from Tura. A certificate of marriage is obtained from him. A Christian mandali (community hall) was also set up very recently where men and women congregate on Sundays to discuss religious matters. There is also some relaxation of marriage rules among Christian with the approval of the church. Moiety exogamy is not strictly followed but they are required to follow sib exogamy. Some individuals even violated the sib exogamy rule.

The situation in 1956 is well reported by Burling, "Although the people of Rengsanggri have made regular trips to the Tura market for many years, their life seems relatively unaffected by the modern

influences of the church, of school, or of new agricultural techniques" (1963: 24). This observation was probably made by Burling after surveying the changes in other villages. Rengsanggri did not lag behind in emulating other villages. The church, the school and the Community Development Block have already made their impact on the religious, educational and agricultural domains of the Rengsanggri community.

#### Notes & References

1. Burling, Robbins, 1963, **Rengsanggri: Family and Kinship in a Garo Village**, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, (Second Printing, 1968).
2. Foster, G.M. et al. (eds), **Long Term Field Research in Social Anthropology**, New York: Academic Press, 1979.