

The Migration and Settlement of the Turung : A Tai Community in Assam

Bonti Rani Gogoi

The Turungs are a small but distinct community who live in six villages in Assam. These are Tipomiya, Pahukatiya and Pothar gaon at Titabar in the district of Jorhat, No. 1 Rajapukhuri Turung village and Basapathar in Golaghat district and Balipathar village in Karbi Anglong district. Their present population, according to a census made by this writer, is about 3000.

All of them are followers of Buddhism of the Hinayana form and each village has a monastery under the charge of a monk who guides the villagers in all matters of Buddhist religion. All ceremonies relating to Buddhism are observed by the villagers with great devotion and sincerity. In their religion they are different from their neighbours. Moreover, they speak among themselves Singpho language heavily mixed with Tai, which also makes them different from their neighbours who speak Assamese language. As they are now living in the midst of Assamese speaking population, the Turungs can speak Assamese well and are having their education through Assamese medium. It is due to their long association with the Singpho, they adopted their master's language. Gait said : "The Shan tribe of Turungs, while held in captivity amongst Singphos, abandoned their native tongue and adopted that of their captors".¹ But they have not totally forgotten their original Tai language in which quite a large number of books and manuscripts relating to different subjects are still to be found in their possession.² Formerly, they all lived on piled houses. Although many new elements have made access into their socio-cultural life, they still preserve their own customs and religion.

The Turungs are not original inhabitants of Assam, rather their migration to Assam is recent from the Hukung valley in Burma only one hundred and sixty five years old during the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26. According to Gait, "The Khamtis, Phakials, Aitonias, Turungs and Khamjangs are all Shan tribes who at different times moved along the same route from the cradle of their race. The Turungs in fact did not reach the plains of Assam until the beginning of the nineteenth century".³

Two explanations are advanced as to the origin of the nomenclature "Turung". According to one, as put forward by G. A. Grierson, the northern Shans were generally known to the other branches as "Tailong" or "Great Tai". In Shan the letter l and r are freely interchanged. So the name "Tailong" takes the form of "Tairong". One section of the Shans who at various times entered Assam is known as Tairongs, Turungs or Shan Turungs.⁴

This view is also taken by P. R. T. Gurdon.⁵ The word Tailong has probably been corrupted into "Tairong" and finally became "Turung". According to the second explanation which is taken from the Turung tradition. for a long time they lived on the bank of a river called Turungpani which is a small tributary of the Chindwin. It is from this place they migrated to Assam and hence came to be known as "Turung". This river has been visited and mentioned by several authorities. G. T. Bayfield in his narrative of journey in 1836-37 from Ava, the capital of Burma, to the frontiers of Assam makes reference to a river Nam-ta-ron or Taronkha.⁶ E. R. Leach, an authority on the Singphos, also records this river under the name "Turung" in a map of upper Burma.⁷ The river Nam-ta-ron or Taronkha is the same river Turungpani as remembered by the Turung themselves and referred to by Grierson.⁸

The Turungs say that while they were living at Turungpani, they received an invitation from the Noras, another Tai group who were then living in the Ahom kingdom.⁹ They set their journey towards Assam and after crossing the Patkai ranges, they were detained by the Singphos, a powerful hill tribe collaborating with the Burmese against the Shans. They were compelled to live with the captors and work for them for several years. They were released from the Singphos by Capt. Neufville, an officer of the English army along with the 6000 Assamese captives in 1825 and were brought to Jorhat for settlement.¹⁰ From that place they moved to other neighbouring areas for settlement and hence they are found today in several pockets.

It is a well-known fact that the Turungs had been released from the captivity of the Singphos in 1825 who also brought them to Jorhat and then they were settled near that place. But the explanation advanced about the name and the story of their migration from Turungpani in the Upper Chindwin in Burma are somewhat not satisfactory and need further study.

So far as the name "Turung" is concerned, the Turung tradition that they are so called because they came to Assam from the bank of Turung or the Turung river in upper Burma, is more convincing than the one given by Grierson and Gurdon that the name "Turung" is a corruption of "Tai-long". It is true that the letters and rare interchanged in Tai, but the interchange occur the other way that is from r to l and not l to r. Secondly, if the Turung tradition that they were detained on the Assam side of the patkai by the Singphos on their way to Assam from Turungpani were accepted, in that case, they must have lived for many years with their captors somewhere in the upper course of the Buri Dihing. It must be admitted that it takes a long time to forget the spoken language by a group and to adopt foreign customs. But that place is never mentioned in the Turung tradition. In that case they would not have been known to the people of Assam as Turungs.

Considering all these points, it appears to us the Turungs were brought by the Singphos direct from the Turungpani where they lived for many years with the latter working for them. It was during this period that they forgot their language and adopted the customs of the captors.

Notes & References

1. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 2.
2. G. A. Grierson, "The History of the Tai and their languages" adopted in *The Tai Khamtis* by L. Gogoi, p. 3 .
3. Edward Gait, op. cit., p. 78.
4. G.A. Grierson, op. cit, p. 39.
5. P.R.T. Gurdon, "On the Khamtis" adopted in *The Tai Khamtis* by L. Gogoi, p. 86.
6. G. T. Bayfield, "Narrative of a journey from Ava to the frontiers of Assam and back, performed between December 1836 and May 1837, under the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Burney, Resident at Ava", *Hill tracts between Assam and Burma* (Selection of papers), p. 20 .
7. E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of High Land Burma*, p. 23.
8. G. A. Grierson, op. cit., p. 39.
9. "The Khamtis and their Kinsmen", *The Tai Khamtis* as adopted by L. Gogoi, p. 78.
U. N. Gohain, "The Khamtis and other Buddhist Tribes in Assam" as adopted in *The Tai Khamtis* by L. Gogoi, p. 72.
10. *Ibid.* G. A. Grierson, op. cit, p. 3 .