CHAPTER I
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Advent of the Turungs:

The Turung tradition says that long ago, they lived in Mung-Mang-Khau-Shang, a place situated in Upper Myanmar (Burma) which, however, cannot be identified. Much later they moved to and settled on the bank of river Turung or Taraon, a small tributary of the Chindwin in the Hukang valley in Myanmar. At what time they came to Turung and for how long they lived there are not known, but they lived there for a considerable period of time. On receiving an invitation from the Noras, also known as the Khamjang, another Tai group who had migrated earlier to and were living in the Ahom kingdom, they took their journey towards Assam. But on their way they were detained by the Singphos, a powerful hill tribe dominating the hill tract between Assam and Myanmar. This tradition is also noted by George Abraham Grierson in his study of the Turung language. They were thus forced to live with the Singphos as their captives.

During the period of Burmese invasions of Assam, when the Singphos of Upper Myanmar joined hands with the Burmese, the latter is believed to have brought the Turungs to the bank of the Na Dihing. It was here that Lt. Neufville, who had a British expedition against the Burmese and the Singphos found them among several thousand captives and brought them to Jorhat. The captives whom Lt. Neufville released from the hands of the Singphos included Assamese, Dowania and Turung\(^2\). Their tradition also says that the Singpho chiefs called *gams* were very reluctant to release the Turungs. However, the Turungs having had consultation among themselves decided to accompany Lt. Neufville who brought them with him to Jorhat and settled them at a place called Toklai, a few km. from Jorhat Town. The number of Turung families accompanying Lt. Neufville was sixty only\(^3\). Subsequently, they left Toklai in search of better cultivable land since they were wet-rice cultivators.


\(^3\) Information collected from Sri Lecham Turung, Teacher, Sarupathar Higher Secondary School on 29.4.90.
A group of them came to Kachukhat near Titabar about 17 km. from Jorhat, another group came to settle at Nagura near the Jamuguri Railway station and the third group came to settle at Bhitar Kaliyani in the present Karbi Anglong district. The Turungs who now live in the village of Bosapathar near Jamuguri in the present Golaghat District are those who originally settled at Nagura. Later on the Turungs who settled at Kachukhat founded three new villages viz. Tipomiya, Pahukatia and Patharshyam in the Titabar area of the present Jorhat District. According to Lecham Turung a few families of Turungs of Kachukhat came and settled at Rajapukhuri village of Sarupathar of the present Golaghat District. The Turung who settled at Bhitar Kaliyani later moved to Balipathar in the Karbi Anglong District and settled there.

Racial Affiliation:

The Turungs belong to the widely spread Tai ethnic and linguistic family. At present Tai people are found over a vast region extending from China's Guangxi

5 Lecham Turung, op.cit., pp.33-34.
province and the Hainan Island in the east to Assam in India on the west, the province of Yunnan in the north to the southern extremity of Thailand in the south. They are thus found in southern China, Laos, northern Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar and their settlements are found particularly in the upper courses of the Brahmaputra, the Irawaddy, the Chindwin, the Shweli, the Mekong, the Menam, the Salwin, the Nam Tha, the Red and the Black rivers. In geographical position, this area lies between 7° to 26° N. (latitude) and from 94° to 111°E. (longitude).

The Tai living in Myanmar are commonly known as the Shans, and those in China are known as Dai, Lue and Zhungs. In Thailand, they are known as the Thai, Yuan, Lue, Phu-Thai; in Laos they are the Lao, Phu-an, Phu-Thai, Tai-Dam, in Vietnam they are known as Black Tai, Red Tai and White Tai, Nung, Tho and Nang (placed under the official name Thai-Tay) 6.

The Tai people are classified from different approaches. Li Fang-Kuei classifies them on the basis of

their dialect. Erik Seidenfaden classifies them according to geographical locations while William Clifton Dodd on the basis of their literacy and non-literacy. John F. Embree and L. William Thomas classifies them as lowland and upland Tai.

The Tai Language belongs to the Tai branch of the Tibeto-Burman family of speech. It is a tonal language and the speakers of the language number about 70 million. G.A. Grierson classifies the Tai language into two groups, Northern and Southern. The former includes Khamti and Ahom of the provinces of Arunachal and Assam of India, Chinese Shan and Burmese Shan. To this also belongs the languages of the Aiton, Phake, Khamjang and Turung. According to Grierson:

"Tairong is the one which is most like Khamti. It is in fact almost the same dialect, the differences being hardly even tribal peculiarities. We have seen how nearly all the Tairongs lost their own language during their captivity among the Singphos, and the few that speak a Tai language at the present day have not improbably learnt it again from their Khamti relations, and have slightly modified it under the influence of dim traditions of their old form of speech."

8 The Thai Peoples, 1967, p.33.
9 The Thai Race, 1923.
10 Ethnic Groups of Northern Southeast Asia, 1950.
Grierson's view that the Turung lost their language during the period of their captivity among the Singphos is only partly true. Their language was influenced by the language of their masters, namely that of the Singphos. So, they now speak a language which is heavily mixed with Singphos.

Culturally, however, the Turung culture still forms a part of the great Tai culture of South East Asia. In general there is a great affinity in culture amongst the Tai all over East and South East Asia. Since the Tais are a widely spread race and live under different climatic conditions and in contact with other tribes and races, their culture have undergone certain changes. This has resulted in local variations. In the same way, as the Turungs are living in six villages of Assam viz. Balipathar, Bosapathar, Pahukatia, Patharshyam, Rajapukhuri and Tipomiya surrounded by Assamese, Nepalis, Garos, Karbis and tea-garden labourers, elements of culture of these tribes and communities have entered into the life of the Turungs.

Of the six Tai groups in North East India, the most dominant and well-known are the Ahoms, whose number now is computed at 1.5 million. They came to the
Brahmaputra valley in the early thirteenth century and were the ruling people for six hundred years. They are concentrated in the six upper Assam districts. The Khamjangs (Noras) are found in the districts of Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Dibrugarh. Their total population is reported to be four thousand\(^\text{12}\). The Phakes or Phakials who number about 3000 live in the district of Dibrugarh\(^\text{13}\). The Aitons locally known as Aitoniyas live in the districts of Golaghat, Karbi Anglong of Assam and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and their population number about three thousand\(^\text{14}\).

The Ahoms and the Khamjangs no longer speak Tai, they speak Assamese. The only village of the Khamjang where Tai is spoken is Pawaimukh near Margherita in Dibrugarh\(^\text{15}\). However, the Khamtis, the Phakes and the Aitons are Tai speakers. There is also a great cultural affinity between the Tai people of Assam and those living in South East Asia\(^\text{16}\).

\(^{12}\) Information collected from Sri Ratneswar Shyam of Rajapukhuri Khamjang village on 3.5.90.

\(^{13}\) Data collected from Sri Ngo-Ken Gohain of Nam Phake village on 16.5.92.

\(^{14}\) Information gathered from Sri Mahendra Shyam of Borgaon on 24.9.90.

\(^{15}\) \text{Tai}, p.22.

Identification of the Name:

There is no unanimity about the written form of the 'Turung'. Several variants such as 'Tirong' or 'Toorangs'¹⁷ 'Tai-rong'¹⁸ , 'Turung'¹⁹ are noticed. These are all Latinised forms written by different writers as they find or adopt the word, but it is not found in Tai language in its written forms and this allows scholars to advance their own explanations.

Regarding the origin and nomenclature of 'Turung' two explanations are generally put forward. According to P.R.T. Gurdon, the 'Turung' or 'Tairong' are Shans. The Khamtis call this group of Shans as 'Tai-long' meaning 'Great Tai'. 'Tailong' has probably corrupted into 'Tairong' and finally into 'Turung'²⁰ . George Abraham Grierson also supports this view and he remarks that since 'I' and 'r' are freely interchanged in Shan, so 'Tai-long' takes the form of 'Tairong', and subsequently

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¹⁹ P. Gogoi, Tai Ahom Religion and Customs, 1976, p.11.
'Turung'. Hence the Turungs of Assam were the Tai-lungs.

But this theory breaks down in the light of another theory that the Khamtis, the Phakes, the Aitons and other Tai groups in upper Myanmar do not have 'r' or 'd' in their alphabets.

Some examples are given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Ahom</th>
<th>Khamti</th>
<th>Turung</th>
<th>Aiton</th>
<th>Nora</th>
<th>Phake</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Ruk</td>
<td>Hok</td>
<td>Huk (Hok)</td>
<td>Huk</td>
<td>Huk</td>
<td>Hok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House</td>
<td>Run</td>
<td>Hun</td>
<td>Hun</td>
<td>Hun</td>
<td>Hun</td>
<td>Hun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>Rau</td>
<td>Tu, Hau</td>
<td>Hau</td>
<td>Hau</td>
<td>Hau</td>
<td>Hau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose</td>
<td>Dang</td>
<td>Hu-nang</td>
<td>Hu-nang</td>
<td>Hu-nang</td>
<td>Nang</td>
<td>Hu-nang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>Dun</td>
<td>Nun or</td>
<td>Nun</td>
<td>Nun</td>
<td>Nun</td>
<td>Noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Dau</td>
<td>Nau</td>
<td>Nau</td>
<td>Nau</td>
<td>Nau</td>
<td>Nau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


List of words of Phake language are cited above from L.Gogoi "A list of English-Ahom-Khamti Phakiyal words", Khamtis, p.111.
Interestingly the Turungs themselves claim that they are called Turung for the fact that they migrated from the bank of the river Turungpani to Assam and hence came to be known as 'Turung'. Turung had been visited by several British officers who include S.F. Hannay, G.T.Bayfield and W.Griffith and this place is mentioned in their narratives of journey. They refer to the river as 'Nam-torong', 'Nam-ta-ron' or 'Taronkha' or 'Tooroon' . E.R.Leach an authority on the Singphos also records this river under the name 'Tarung' in a map of upper Myanmar . The river 'Nam-ta-ron' or 'Taronkha', 'Nam-torong', 'Nam-turon' or 'Tooroon' and 'Turung' is the same river Turungpani as remembered by the Turungs themselves and referred to by Grierson.

The explanation that the Turungs are so called because they came to Assam from the bank of the Turungpani or the Turung river in upper Myanmar 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 'l' and 'r' are interchanged in Tai but the interchange occurs the other way that is from 'r' to 'l' and not from 'l' to

23 Hill Tracts Between Assam and Burma, Selection of Papers, 1978, pp. 130-203.
24 E.R.Leach, Political Systems of Highland Burma, 1954, p.23
'r'. Secondly, if the Turung tradition that they were detained on the Assam side of the Pataki 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. Whatever the place it never occurs in the Turung tradition. It appears that the Turungs were living with the Singphos on the bank of the Turungpani from where they were brought by the latter to the Na Dihing.

**Historical Evidence:**

A manuscript chronicle called *Lik-Khu-Mong* now preserved in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies at Guwahati and translated into Assamese by Mr. Nabin Shyam says that during the Anglo-Burmese war in 1824-26, Lt. Neufville in his pursuit of the Burmese reached the Na Dihing, where he came across the Singphos, who allied with the former. Taking advantage of the situation during that period the Turungs fled away and came into contact with the Aitons who were then living at Rongdoi Chung near Kachupani. The Turungs appealed to the Aitons to allow them to live with the latter as 'brothers'. For this

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25 Mr. Shyam is an Aiton and is engaged as Ahom Pandit in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati.
purpose they sent four messengers to the chief of the Aitons. The message runs thus, 'According to our grandfathers, both the Turungs and the Aitons belong to the same group. Our grandfather advised us to seek your help whenever we would be in danger. Therefore we have come to you for shelter. We pray to you that you would accept us as your brothers and we happily accept the chief of the Aitons as our 'Chaopha' (king). To this, the chief of the Aitons asked them not to tell lie, nor to quarrel with the Aitons. The Turungs promised to behave accordingly. It was also agreed that in the event of violation of the promise, they would have to pay heavy penalty in kind to the chief of the Aitons. This promise was recorded in writing as desired by the chief of the Aitons. The Turungs agreed and accordingly a buffalo was sacrificed to commemorate the occasion. That was how the Turung became close relations of the Aitons.

This was followed by another agreement made in the Tai year kap chao in the month of Din Sip (Tenth month or Bhadra) on full moon day, when the Aitons were staying at Marangi. At that time a violent earthquake occurred\textsuperscript{26}. Since then the Turungs and the Aitons have

\textsuperscript{26} Ms.No. 2197. Preserved in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati.
been living in harmony and amity and this led to intermarriage between the two groups resulting in admixture of blood of both. Even today intermarriage between the members of the two groups do often take place and it is not socially forbidden, rather it is welcomed by both.

Khamti Tradition:

The tradition of the Khamtis speaks that the Turungs are a sub-tribe of the Singphos belonging to the Bisanong family. They mostly speak the Singpho language. This view is collected from Sri Chandra Gohain, a Khamti youth as referred to by Dr. P. Gogoi.  

Phake Tradition:

In a memorandum submitted by the Khamtis and the Phakes in the year 1979, the Turungs are referred to as sub-tribe of Singphos. The signatories of this memorandum were

27 Lik-Phan-Tai, Journal of the Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam, 1966, p. 44.

28 Memorandum submitted to the Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe Orders (Amendment) Bill 1978, on 11th June, 1979 by the Khamtis, the Phakeys etc. at Dibrugarh.
As mentioned earlier due to intermarriage between the Singphos and the Turungs, the latter was reduced to a sub-tribe of the former. It is due to this that they are looked down upon by the Phakes. They, however, take Turung girls as their wives without any hesitation, but they do not prefer a Turung boy as their son-in-law. In spite of having considerable admixture of blood with the Singphos and adoption of certain customs of the Singphos by the Turungs it is now a confirmed fact that the Turungs are basically Tai people as is evident from the writings of different scholars at different time. It is also true that the Turungs now-a-days speak a language heavily mixed up with the Singphos, but they originally used their own Tai Language which is confirmed by the

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29 Interview with Mr. Ngo-Ken Gohain, aged 55 yrs of Nam Phake village, Naharkatia on 21.9.90.
existence of number of books and manuscripts relating to different subjects written in Tai Script and language at their possession.\(^\text{30}\)

All the scholars agree that the Turungs are a section of Tai. Mention may be made of S.F. Hannay,\(^\text{31}\) E.A. Gait, S. Rajkumar, J.N. Phukan, P. Gogoi, L. Gogoi, I. Barua, B.J. Terwiel, G.C. Sharma Thakur, K.C. Mahanta, and R. Rajguru.\(^\text{32}\)


\(^{31}\) "The Shans of Burma and Assam", Notes on the Shans or Tai Nation, 1847-48, as adopted in *Khamtis*, p.71.

\(^{32}\) *A History of Assam*, 1963, p.78.


\(^{35}\) *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, 1968, p.1.


\(^{38}\) *Tais II*, p.7.

\(^{39}\) *Phakes*, p.2.


\(^{41}\) *Medieval Assamese Society (1228-1826)*, 1988, p.142.
S.F. Hannay gives us a list of the Shan tribes who migrated to Assam from time to time. They are Phake, Khamjang, Aiton (Itong), Turung (Tirong) and Tawang (?).

From all these, it appears that the Turung is a small section of the Tai and are still supposed to exist in the province of Mongkong in Myanmar.

Population:

The number of population of the Turung at the time of their migration to Assam was very few. W.W. Hunter was the first to make an attempt to survey the population of Assam towards the end of the 19th century. But he does not refer to the Turung and other Tai groups living in Assam except the Khamtis, whose number was estimated at 21. The Census of 1881 does not record any Turung in Assam but gives the figure of Shans as 275 and Khamtis as 2883. The Shans and Khamtis in this report probably include the Aitons, the Phakes and other Tai groups including the Turungs. The exact number of population of

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the Turungs cannot be ascertained from the report. The number of Tairongs or Turungs counted at the Census of 1891 was 301\(^45\). The Census of 1891 under the head 'Religion' gives us the number of Buddhist population of Sibsagar and Naga hill districts as 987 and 360 respectively. It, however, does not mention the groups of Assam individually, but says that the Buddhists of Sibsagar and Naga hills are of Shan origin. The Turungs are said to be of Shan origin and Buddhists\(^46\). Under the head 'Language' of the people, the same Census of 1891 gives the Shan language speakers as 4221. Under the head 'Non-Indian-Asiatic Races', Ahom, Aiton, Khamyang, Khamti, Nora, Phakial and Shan are mentioned but Turung does not appear. The Shans have been estimated at 1,278 which probably includes the Turungs as well. The Census of Assam in 1901 records the Turung population in the Sibsagar district as 411. G.A.Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India gives a total number of Turung speakers under the dialectical group as 150 in the district of Sibsagar as shown below\(^47\).

\(^{45}\) Gait's Census Report, 1891, p.284.
\(^{46}\) Census Report of Assam, 1901.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>District / Area</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khamti</td>
<td>Lakhimpur Dist</td>
<td>2,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phakial</td>
<td>Do</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tairong</td>
<td>Do</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiton</td>
<td>Sibsagar and Naga hills</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4,205</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>