Vaiṣṇavism or Bhakti a reformed form of Hinduism preached by a galaxy of religious saint and poets in different regions of India, emphasized in the unity of godhead and discarded the image worship and ritualism in many instances. This movement swept over the length and breadth of India during the medieval period and created many sects, most of which were Vaiṣṇavite creeds. The propounders of each sect or his followers were not only scholars in traditional learning, but some of them were also great poet and singers. Hence this movement was regarded as the mass movement. Its shows a remarkable capacity for holding together a variety of religious, cultural and social extremes. Vaiṣṇavism bridges the gulf between such believes and the purely Aryan tradition by emphasizing devotion to the divine-bhakti as the supreme way of salvation.

The Bhakti movement also termed as the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement was originated in Assam in the beginning of 16th century. It was based on what was going on India for a few centuries prior to that. Being by nature a protestant movement against existing brahmanical ritualism and caste rigidity, bhakti system brought a revolutionary social outlook in men and a literary outburst in entire India. Its protestant side interrogated the priesthood and the feudal oppression of the state. Rooted in this ideological background, bhakti initiated by Śaṅkaradeva and his followers in Assam may be termed as to be a revolutionary phase of the process of socio-cultural evolution in this region of the India.

The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam was a part of larger Pan-Indian resurgence of bhakti in medieval India, that spanned nearly a little over five centuries from the devotional cult of Alvars in Tamil Nadu to the teaching of Ramanuja, Nimbaraka, Madhavacharyya, Vallabhacharyya, Caitanya Kabir, Guru Nanak and others. While it was basically a reaction against the excesses of sacerdotal religion, the spirit of new ideas manifested itself as an overall social change almost unprecedented in its scale in the history of Assam. Hence, Śaṅkaradeva could not have been a follower of Caitanya. Though some would regard the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam as an off-shoot of Gauḍiya-Vaiṣṇavism, these two schools are independent of each other.

Although, an import from outside, bhakti movement in Assam was not a replica or a copy of what was there in other parts of India. With its own socio-political and economic background, this movement appease (contrive) an ideology and a
structure of its own and to distinguish it from other bhakti system of the country. The most distinguished independent aspect of this movement in Assam was its Satra system with Nāṁghar for the villagers. Irrespective of caste and tribe affiliation, the movement signaled the breakdown of the Ahom system of feudalism maintained by their kings through Paik system. Marked by absence of idol worship and system of celibacy in the sect, these Satras formed by themselves a class different in structural forms and ideological bases from the others of its class as institution.

The bhakti school of Bengal also termed as the Gauḍyā-Vaiṣṇavism which was flourished in Bengal during the last decade of 15th century and the early decade of 16th century. Caitanya, the originator of this movement in Bengal emphasized much on the mystic eroticism of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cult which was quite different from the sturdy Monotheism of Śaṅkara, who in his basic faith believed in Supreme Deity, who was no one else than Kṛṣṇa of the Bhagavad-Puraṇas. Sankaradeva’s doctrine was Eka-śaraṇā-hari-nāma-dharma’or Ek-śaraniya. Besides, unlike Caitanya, Śaṅkara, was a thorough non-believer in some of the most characteristic social and other ideologies of Hinduism like caste system, untouchability, artificial barrier of different sampradāya etc.

Though Vaiṣṇavism preached by different preachers have some basic difference as exists between Assam and Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, yet the main characteristic of all the Vaiṣṇavism is same—it has opened wide the portals of the temple of God for everyone from the highest to the lowest and binds them with the sacred tie of brotherhood. It will always remain as living religion. The ground on which its stand and its all prevailing vitality will remain unchanged – as it is based on eternal truths, such as love, ahiṁsa, humility, unbending rigidity in principles, devotion to one God etc.

The project has been organized under seven chapters, so that each can throw light on the details of the allotted episode.

The 1st chapter is the Introduction which sketches the background of the movement. It contained the analysis of socio-cultural, economic and religious psyche of the movement.

Chapter II, here we analyzed the history of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam with special reference to both pre and post bhakti movement period. It contains different aspects of the movement and its impact on the society, an account of the socio-religious and political condition of the period. We also specify the life sketches of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva and their other followers and the various Saṁhati that
Chapter III highlights the socio-cultural and religio-philosophical aspects of the people of Bengal prior to the advent of Caitanya Mahaprabhu, life sketches of Caitanya and his followers, different aspects of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism and its impacts on the society. It also contains the various divisions that originated after the death of Caitanya.

Chapter IV contains a comparative study of the Vaiṣṇava cultures of Assam and Bengal from religious point of view. It also contains similarities and dissimilarities between this two Vaisnavite cultures, religious and ritual rites and its impacts on the society from ethical and humanistic point of view.

Chapter V deals a comparative study of both cultures from sociological point of view. It contains the origin and the function of various innovative institutions of both cultures.

Chapter VI contains a comparative study on literature of both cultures. Attempt has been made to bring into light the Vaiṣṇava literature and the emergence of an artificial language being an admixture of Maithili, Assamese and Bengali, called ‘Vrajavali’ in Assam and ‘Vrajabuli’ in Bengal. Attempt also made to depict the influence of other language on Bengali.

Chapter VII contains the summary of our findings.

I started my research under the able guidance of Professor Dr. Amalendu Chakraborty, Head of Dept. of Bengali, Gauhati University. With his vast knowledge of Vaisnavism of both Assam and Bengal and its Literature he has guided and supervised my study. Inspite of his busy schedule, Chakraborty Sir has spared a lot of his valuable time in guiding me with memorable discussion, inquiries and comments. I have to take the help few of my friends and few other scholars whose selfless service in completion of my research can never be forgotten.

My sincere attempt was to complete the work mainly on the basis of both the primary sources and secondary sources, and verbal discussion with the Satradhikaras and other officials of the Satras. In spite of my sincere efforts, errors may have crept-up into the work for which I owe due apology to the learned readers and scholars.

In our foot notes we have mentioned the names of the authors, the titles of the books and the concerned page numbers only. Detail of such publication, place of publication etc. would be available in the bibliography. In the footnotes and in the bibliography we use some abbreviations. There are certain words and idiomatic in Assamese and Bengali which presume translation and if translated literally the
suggestion and expression are lost. For this reason we have used the proverbs, riddles, rhymes, songs and certain regional words as they are. To keep intact the spirit of expression I have quoted few lines of reknown scholars in their original language. In our thesis, in translating the congenial Assamese and Bengali words, we have kept in mind their pronunciation in both Assamese and Bengali. We have kept the title of books and articles, the names of the months and the transcript and the vernacular words in Italics and specific words within quotation mark. We have also procured the page numbers in connection with rhymes, proverbs and Gītas in the chapters. In the prime part of our research work, the regional words have been kept within brackets. I have already mentioned the source. Both the translated version of Bhāgavata by Śaṅkaradeva and in some cases the original one was followed. Where I could not manage the original one help of secondary source has been taken. Commentaries of the scholars on different works of the preachers also consulted extensively and I have mentioned all those source of the footnotes. In few cases the publishers and year of publication could not be traced out. I sincerely admit the discrepancies in using diacritical marks in my thesis.

It took almost 6 years to collect materials, as it required a wide range of field work, which covered not only Assam but also Koch- Behar. Being a College Lecturer, a house-wife and mother of three school going children, I could not manage the required time for such extensive study and have to seek extension of my research period. The University has granted extension as per rule and somehow I have managed to complete the work.

In completion of my research I have gone through books, journals, epics, articles and commentaries of distinguished scholars. I had to approach many persons, visit many libraries, satras etc for collection of facts. Their names have as far as possible been mentioned in appropriate place.

Utmost care has been taken to make the thesis error free. Inspite of my sincere efforts there may have crept-up some errors, typographical mistakes etc., for which I owe due apology to my guide and to the learned readers and scholars.

Mamoni Sarma