Chapter II

A Short Survey of Early Assamese Literature

I

In this study an attempt is being made to conduct a survey of the Assamese literature of the period comprising four hundred years from the 14th century to the 17th century A.D. This is because the subject of our study has been based on the Assamese literature of this period.

The Assamese literature of this age has been divided into certain periods in accordance with subject-matter, style and, if necessary, centering around some personality and we shall discuss in the subsequent chapters the pictures of Assamese socio-cultural life as depicted in the literature of those ages. True it is that saint Saṅkaradeva was not just the propagator of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, but he was also a poet, dramatist, artist, actor, social reformer and builder of the Assamese nationality. Saṅkaradeva is the central personality in Vaiṣṇavism and Vaiṣṇava literature. That is why scholars have assumed the birth of an age of Assamese literature beginning from 1449 A.D., the year of Saṅkaradeva's birth. Pandit Hemchandra
Goswami\(^1\) andDimbeswar Neog have termed this age as Vaisnava era,\(^2\) Satyendra Nath Sarma as Śaṅkarite age,\(^3\) while Maheswar Neog instead of dividing the ages in like manner, has discussed that Neo-Vaisnava literature originated from the time of Śaṅkaradeva and that Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva were the two great luminaries of Assamese literature.\(^4\) The Assamese social and cultural life as reflected in the literature of this age will be discussed in the Chapter IV. The Assamese literary age prior to the advent of Śaṅkaradeva has been variously termed as Prāg Vaiṣṇava Yuga\(^5\) by Hemchandra Goswami, Purva Vaiṣṇava yuga\(^6\) by Dimbeswar Neog, Prāk-Śaṅkara Yuga\(^7\) by Maheswar Neog and Prāk-Śaṅkari Yuga\(^8\) by Satyendra Nath Sarma. We shall discuss the Assamese social and cultural life as depicted in the literature of this age in the Chapter III. A few other Vaiṣṇava poets who were contemporaneous to Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva were Ananta

1. H.C. Goswami, Asamiyā Sāhityar Cāneki, Vol. II
2. D. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Buraṇjī, p. 211
3. S.N. Sarma, Asamiyā Sāhityar Samikṣātmak Itivṛtta, p. 128
4. M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekha, pp. 75-106
5. H.C. Goswami, Asamiyā Sāhityar Cāneki, Intro., p. 18
7. M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekha, pp. 49-74
8. S.N. Sarma, Asamiyā Sāhityar Samikṣātmak Itivṛtta, pp. 56-86
Kandali, Rāma Sarasvatī, Śrīdhar Kandali and others. They were Vaiṣṇava poets; and their works are marked by Śaṅkaradeva’s influence. Hence Dr. Neog has justly characterised them as the poets-literateurs belonging to the umbra and penumbra (pracchāyā āru upacchāyā) of the great light of Śaṅkaradeva.\footnote{The Assamese socio-cultural life as reflected in the works of these poets have been discussed in the Chapter V. Besides there were three contemporary poets of the age of Śaṅkaradeva, namely, Mankar, Durgāvara and Pitāmbara. They are known as Pāncālī poets,\footnote{Even though they were contemporaneous to Śaṅkaradeva, they were largely free from Vaiṣṇava influence. Their writings were marked by popular elements and specially in Mankar’s and Durgāvara’s writings the story of Manasā, the goddess of snakes, is the central subject. Another poet of high order who has composed Manasā Kāvyā is Sukavi Nārāyaṇa Deva. He composed a voluminous poetic work called Pāḍmāpurāṇa by incorporating the tales of Manasā Devī, Cānd Sadāgar, Beulā-Lakhindār, etc. The Assamese social and cultural life as reflected in the poetic works of these four poets will be discussed in the Chapter VI.} and their works are called Pāncālī.\footnote{M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, pp. 129-155} Even though they were contemporaneous to Śaṅkaradeva, they were largely free from Vaiṣṇava influence. Their writings were marked by popular elements and specially in Mankar’s and Durgāvara’s writings the story of Manasā, the goddess of snakes, is the central subject. Another poet of high order who has composed Manasā Kāvyā is Sukavi Nārāyaṇa Deva. He composed a voluminous poetic work called Pāḍmāpurāṇa by incorporating the tales of Manasā Devī, Cānd Sadāgar, Beulā-Lakhindār, etc. The Assamese social and cultural life as reflected in the poetic works of these four poets will be discussed in the Chapter VI.\footnote{M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, pp. 107-128} \footnote{S.N. Sarma, Asamiyā Sāhityar Samāksātmak Itivṛtta, pp. 108-127}
There is a saying in Sanskrit that without support poetry, women and creepers cannot live.¹ We cannot ignore the significance of this saying—altogether. Just as some creepers cannot live on without support or it is difficult for a woman to carry on in the world, so also without the patronage of someone, poetry or the creator of poetry or men of letters found it difficult to create literature by overcoming their financial handicaps. Many famed poets of the world such as Kālidāsa, Bāṇabhaṭṭa, Āmir Khaśru, Omar Khaiyām, Chaucer, Wordsworth, Tennyson created literature by gaining royal patronage. This is applicable in the cases of many ancient Assamese poets. They gained inspiration or patronage from the kings. The kings employed the poets to translate into versified Assamese from the original Sanskrit the various stories of the purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa and also learn about the moral, religious and spiritual ideas lying in those writings. They also engaged them to compose original poems based on ancient stories and provided them with all facilities. The poets also composed the books for the entertainment of the king and the people as also for their moral and spiritual uplift. For instance, the never-failing poet of the pre-Śaṅkara-deva era, Mādhava

¹ "bināśrayam na jīvanti kavitā vanītā latā", (as quoted in Prabandha-Śaṅcayan, p. 296)
Kandali has himself stated that he translated the Valmiki-Ramayana into Assamese under the patronage of the Barahi king Sri Mahamanikya.1 Sri Mahamanikya was the Kachari king of Jayantapur. According to Dr. Banikanta Kakati he reigned towards the end of the fourteenth century A.D.2 Pandit Hemchandra Goswami,3 Kanaklal Baruah,4 Kaliram Medhi,5 Dr. Maheswar Neog,6 Dr. Satyendranath Sarma7 and others also have placed Mahamanikya in the 14th century A.D., but in different places. From this point of view one finds that as far back as the 14th century A.D. the Ramayana was composed in Assamese and it proves that this Ramayana had been composed even earlier than the Bengali Krittibasi and Hindi Tulsidas Ramayana which were composed in the 15th and the 16th century A.D. respectively. Like Madhava Kandali, another

1. kaviraj kandali ye amakese bulivaya kariloho sarbbajanbodhe ramayana supayara srimahamanikya ye varaha raja anurodhe
   - Rama, Lañka, v. 6710
2. Assamese, Its Formation and Development, p. 23
3. The Bähī, Vol. XVIII
4. Early History of Kamarupa, pp. 320-21
5. Assamese Grammar and Origin of the Assamese Language (1936), Intro., p. xci
6. Asamijā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, p. 55
7. Asamijā Sāhityar Samaksātmak Itivṛtta, p. 72
poet of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era, namely, Harivara Vīpra also named his patron King Durlabhānārayaṇa of the Kamata kingdom.¹ Another contemporary poet Hema Sarasvatī also has introduced himself by praising Durlabhānārayaṇa, the Kamata king.² Kaviratna Sarasvatī, again, besides praising Durlabhānārayaṇa, has also sung in praise of his son Indranārayaṇa.³ From these it can be presumed that these poets enjoyed royal patronage in composing their works.

1. jaya jaya narapati durlabhānārayaṇa rājā
ekāmapure bhaila vīranara
   - Babruvāhanar Yuddha, v. 223

2. kamata maṇḍala durlabhānārayaṇa
   nṛpavara anupāma

3. nṛpa śiromani deva mahāmāni
durlabha nārāyaṇa rājā
   nite puttravate pālilā satate
   prithivīra yata prajā
tāhāna tanaya bhaila dharmamaya
   indranārayaṇa deva
   mahāvīra dhīra svabhāve gambhīra
   nite krīḍya harideva
Of these kings, Durlabhanarayana, the Kamata king was the earliest and Dr. Neog presumes that he might have ruled either during the last part of the 13th century or the middle part of the 14th century A.D.¹ If that were so, Indranarayana would belong to a little later period. Even though Pandit Hem Chandra Goswami has accepted Rudra Kandali as a poet of the pre-Saṅkaradeva era, Dr. Neog has presumed him to have been a Kachari king of Khāspur of the early 18th century A.D.²

Under the patronage of these kings, Assamese literature found a new expression in versified form. Even though we have evidence of certain 'caryāpadas' having composed in proto-Assamese language during the 10th-11th century A.D., yet we do not have any exact evidence of Assamese literature of the period of 12th-13th centuries A.D., even if there was any, it must have got lost either due to natural calamity or some other reasons. From the fair form of Assamese literature of the pre-Saṅkaradeva era one can presume that Assamese literature was also composed during the 12th-13th centuries A.D. Secondly, it was during this period that for the first time the Sanskrit epic the Rāmāyaṇa was translated into Assamese and taking stories

1. B. Kakati, ed., Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 18
2. M. Neog, Asamīyā Sāhityar Rūprekha, p. 73
from the Mahābhārata and the Vāmaṇa-purāṇa some narrative
poems were composed. It was Madhava Kandali who translated
the Rāmāyaṇa, under the patronage of King Mahāmāṇikya. While
translating he usually remained loyal to the original and
translated the original verses (ślokas) in a powerful yet
compact and expressive form.¹ For instance, the śloka
belonging to the Laṅkā-Kāṇḍa -

"dese dese kalatrāṇi dese dese ca bāndhavah
tam tu desam na pasyāmi yatra bhratā sahodarāh"

has been rendered briefly and sweetly in this way -

"bhāryā puttra bandhu yata pāi yathā tathā
hena natu dekhohō sodara pāi kothā"²

While rendering the Rāmāyaṇa, even though the poet
has stated that he has only kept true to the original, yet
in accordance with King Mahāmāṇikya's wishes he has added
some poetic flavour.³ Accordingly, the poet, taking the
Rāmāyaṇa as a popular tale and not a divine message, has
occasionally added erotic expressions and fine descriptions

1. M. Neog, Asamīyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, p. 56
2. Rāmāyaṇa, v. 5171
3. sātakāṇḍa rāmāyaṇa padavandhe nivandhilo
   lambhā parihari sārodhrte
   mahāmāṇikyara bole kāvyā rasa kichu dilo
   dugdhaka mathile yena ghṛte
   - Rāmāyaṇa, v. 6710
of battles, natural beauty, cities and forests, etc. In his descriptions, we find the depiction of Assamese life and society in a variegated manner. Among the pre-Śaṅkaradeva poets, undoubtedly Mādhava Kandali is the most superior. Śaṅkaradeva has highly praised him and by comparing him to an elephant, while calling himself a mere hare.\(^1\) Even though Mādhava Kandali is found mentioning in somewhere that he had composed the seven cantos of the Rāmāyaṇa in verses,\(^2\) we find only the middle part of the five cantos of the Rāmāyaṇa composed by him. In this context it has been mentioned in the Kathā-gurucarita that Ananta Kandali having decided to suppress Mādhava Kandali's Rāmāyaṇa and compose one by himself, Mādhavadeva in order to perpetuate Mādhava Kandali's name composed the Ādikānda and Śaṅkaradeva composed the Uttarakāṅḍa and thereby completed the Assamese Rāmāyaṇa, and added some devotional adage (upadesa) to the end of each chapter of Kandali's Rāmāyaṇa.\(^3\) Even though Mādhava Kandali translated the Rāmāyaṇa by being loyal to the original,

\begin{quote}
1. pūrvakavi apramādi mādhava kandali ādi
tehe viracilā rāmakathā
hastīra dekhiyā lāda sāsa yena phāre mārga
mora vaila tehnaya avasthā.
- Rāmāyaṇa, Uttara-Kāṇḍa, v. 7041

2. Rāmāyaṇa, v. 6710

3. KGC, p. 119
\end{quote}
occasionally he took to the plea that it was not a divine message (‘daiva bāṇī nuhi iṭo loukik he kathā’) but popular tale and that the poets follow popular taste (‘loka byavahāre’) so as to add descriptions of natural beauty and especially pictures of Assamese social life. This has been discussed in greater details in the following pages.

Even though there is another work called Devajīta which was purported to have been written by Mādhava Kandali, scholars presume it to be the work of later age from the point of view of beauties of expression. Harivara Vipra, another poet of that period wrote three poetic works, viz., Lavakuśar-Yuddha, Babruvāhanar-Yuddha and Tāmradhvajar-Yuddha based upon the story from Jaiminyāsvamedha. From his self-introduction it is learnt that during the later part of the thirteenth century A.D. or in the early part of the fourteenth century A.D. he received the patronage of King Durlabhanārayana of Kamatā and from his proclaimed devotion

1. Rāmāyana, Kiśkindhyā-Kānda, v. 3993
2. M. Neog, 'Assamese Literature Before Śaṅkaradeva' in Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 29
4. B. Kakati, ed., Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 35
towards Gaurī\(^1\) he can be presumed as Śākta. In the Babruvāhanar-Yuddha, there are descriptions of war between Arjuna and Babruvāhana and killing of Arjuna in that war and lastly rebirth of Arjuna with the 'Saṃjivani' jewel brought by Babruvāhana from the lower region with the advice of mother Citrāngadā and step-mother Ulupi. Likewise in the Lavakuṣār-Yuddha the story of war between Rāma and his sons Lava-Kuśa due to the blockade of the horse of Aśvamedha-yajña and Rāma's death in the war and at last how Rāma got back his life by the grace of Vālmiki is narrated. In Tāmradhvajar-Yuddha, description of the war between King Mayūradhvaja's son Tāmradhvaja and Arjuna due to the arrest of Yudhiṣṭhīra's Aśvamedha horse is found. In this works of Harivara Vipra, his poetic talent is reflected. While depicting Assamese way of life in these works the poet has not deviated from the original. In certain cases and according to subject matters things are abridged. In portraying natural scenes, pictures of houses, etc., and in describing heroic and pathetic sentiments the poet has shown his extra-ordinary capability. The language is enriched with the use of phrases and idioms, etc.

Another poet Hema Sarasvatī, contemporary to the Kamatā King Durlabhānārāyaṇa wrote a small narrative, viz.,

\[ \text{1. vipra harivara kal. gaurītra caraṇa sei} \]
\[ \text{padabandhe karilo pracāra} \]
\[ \text{− Babruvāhanar Yuddha, v. 225} \]
the Prahlāda-Caritra on the basis of Vāmanapurāṇa. But in the Vāmanapurāṇa found and published now, this story is not available. So the scholars surmise that the poet collected the story from some 'Mahāpurāṇa' with the name Vāmanapurāṇa that prevailed during his days. It is narrated in this poetic work that Hiranyakasipu the demon-king tortured his son Prahlāda for chanting the name of God. So Viṣṇu as the incarnation of Narasimha killed Hiranyakasipu. The description in the work is very simple and the glory of Viṣṇu is reflected there.

The poet's another work is Hara-gauriṣamvāda. The poet has expressed that the first and the rest of the parts of the work is taken from the originals of Narasimhapurāṇa and Hara-gauriṣamvāda respectively. In this narrative the

1. M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, p. 73; S.N. Sarma, Asamiyā Sāhityar Samiksātmak Itivrtta, p. 62
2. kamaṭāmaṇḍala durlabhanārāyaṇa
   nṛpavara anupāma
tāhāna rājyata rudra sarasvati
devayāni kanyā nāma
tāhāna tanaya hema sarasvati
dhruvara anuja bhāi
   padabandha teho pracāra karilā
evamanapurāṇa cāi

- Prahlāda-caritra, ed. by K. Medhi, p. 11
tales of demon Tādakā's warfare, the burning down of Kāmadeva with fire coming out of god Śiva's eye and the birth of Kārtika are described. The scholars presume that Kālikā-purāṇa and Kālidāsa's Kumāra-sambhava influenced the poetic work.

During this period, another poet Kaviratna Sarasvati wrote Jayadratha-vadha Kāvyā on the basis of Droṇaparva of the Mahābhārata. From the self introduction given by the poet in the narrative, it is learnt that he was patronised by the Kamatā King Duralabhanārāyaṇa and his son Indranārāyaṇa, and his home was at Cotaśilā or Śilā village near Barpeta. The poet has composed verses by taking the story of Jayadratha-vadha from the Droṇaparva of the Mahābhārata. The expression and the use of words by the poet are very simple. Of course, the description of Kailāśa is a very attractive part of the poetic work.

III

The pre-Śaṅkaradeva period was followed by the age of Śaṅkaradeva (1949-1568 A.D.). A good number of poets of

this age including the most eminent of them - Saṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Rāma Sarasvatī and Ananta Kandali - not only enriched the treasures of literature but also made immense contributions towards the propagation of the Vaiṣṇava faith. The great poet saint Saṅkaradeva is the founder of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. This religion was propagated for the spiritual peace and social progress of the common people. In books meant for the understanding of the common people, Saṅkaradeva nowhere tried to immerse himself in purely philosophic deliberations. Vedānta-sūtra or Uttara-mīmāṁsā is one of the six philosophic systems. The propagators of the bhakti-cult in Assam accepted the essence of Upaniṣads from the Bhāgavata itself without approaching Vedānta-sūtra or Uttara-mīmāṁsā and have explained the ideas of brāhmaṇa accordingly. Here we find only an indirect influence of the Vedānta-sūtra. The influence of Śrīdhar Svāmī is worth noting in Saṅkaradeva's and Ananta Kandali's explication of the Bhāgavata, Mādhavadeva's Nāmghosā, Bhattachardeva and Govinda Misrā's exposition of the Gītā.1 Certain characteristics of the Neo-vaiṣṇava faith propagated by Saṅkaradeva are worth noting. It is mainly based on devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Even though Saṅkaradeva has spoken of nine forms of devotion, he has paid greater importance to

1. M. Neog, Asamīya Sāhityar Rūprekhā, pp. 78-79
Sravana and Kirtana forms of devotion. He advocated that instead of worshipping various gods and goddesses one should keep one's faith in Viṣṇu only. He has also stressed over the needlessness of various rituals like Yajña, meditation, etc. Emphasis was placed on the Guru (preceptor) and the company of the pious one.

The Vaisnava poets not only translated either fully or partially the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa and several purāṇas but also composed the devotional poems, lyrics (bargīt), dramas, long narratives, treatises of philosophical thoughts, etc. It was also the age when Assamese prose literature made its first appearance.

In the translation works belonging to the age of Śaṅkaradeva, the principle of selection, omission and elaboration was followed. For instance matters relating to highly philosophical thoughts or those opposed to or was not relevant to the Vaisnava faith were dropped. Secondly, those Sanskrit verses (ślokas) favouring the preaching of bhakti were rendered verbatim into Assamese. Thirdly, those portions of Sanskrit texts which were a help to the propagation of the Vaisnava faith were elaborated by the imagination of the poets. For instance, descriptions of Lord Kṛṣṇa's beauty, descriptions of various playful activities (līlā) of Lord Kṛṣṇa, the nobility and significance of bhakti, the significance of ekaśāraṇa (one
refuge) namadharma, paying allegiance to only one god or Viśnu instead of many gods and goddesses. Viṣṇu is no other than Kṛṣṇa or Kṛṣṇa is bhagavān (kṛṣṇāstu bhagavān svayam). There is no other god but He (ekameva advitiyam). He is the only Supreme God and by single hearted devotion to that God, man can attain to salvation from the worldly bondage. These themes found place in the translations and narrative poems. Besides these, the poet would even add exaggerations to those matters that could attract the common man; for instance, descriptions of battles, humorous descriptions, descriptions of natural scenes, descriptions of various aspects of Assamese society, etc. And for such omissions and commissions the poets like Madhavadeva begged excuse from the readers by saying that even the great poet like Vyāsa occasionally exaggerated matters.¹

A characteristic feature of literature of the period under purview is that, while narrating some episodes, the poets of those days used to take the help of several books in Sanskrit in accordance with the necessity. For instance, while composing Rukmini-harana Śaṅkaradeva used, besides Bhāgavata-purāṇa, the Harivaṃśa² as well. Similarly he made

1. Rājasūya, vv. 779-80
2. eke harivaṃśa kathā amṛta sākṣāta
   āru bhāgavata kathā miśra dilo tāta.

    - Rukmini-harana Kāvyā, v. 5
use of the Bhāgavata, the Viṣṇupurāṇa and Harivamśa while writing the Pārijāta-harana drama. Again, the plot of the drama Rāmavijaya was based on the Rāmāyaṇa and the Agnipurāṇa.¹

In the case of attractive and important narratives, the poets besides translating into Assamese, would also shape those into dramas or poems (kāvyā) with their original genius. The narrative poems Rukminī-harana and the drama on the same theme illustrate this point. In the same manner, by taking out the story of Rāsalīlā from the five chapters (29th to 33rd) of the 10th Book of the Bhāgavata-purāṇa Śaṅkaradeva has used it in composing the Rāsakrīḍā part of the Kirtana-ghosā, his translated Dasāma and in writing Ke ligopāla drama as well.

The poets of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era did not give prominence to the Vaiṣṇava religion; only occasionally they would mention the playful activities (līlā) of Viṣṇu or Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, but the poets of the Vaiṣṇava era have paid special attention to only Viṣṇu. All the writings of pre-Śaṅkaradeva era were composed in verses. During the Śaṅkaradeva era Śaṅkaradeva initially used poetic prose also in his dramas. Later on Bhaṭṭadeva, by his prose rendering of Bhāgavata-kathā, Gitā-kathā and Bhaktiratnāvali-kathā opened up the vista of

¹ Kaliram Medhi, ed., Āṅkāvalī, Intro., p. 79
Assamese prose. The poets of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era did not use the Bhāgavata-purāṇa as their source-book while doing translation works or creating poems. The pride of place and the popularity which Bhāgavata-purāṇa and Harivamśa gained during the age of Śaṅkaradeva was not seen among these earlier writers. Most probably the poets of those days did not come across the Bhāgavata-purāṇa as some people hold because in the Caritas (biographies) it is narrated how their successor poet and propagator of the neo-Vaishnava faith Śaṅkaradeva got the Bhāgavata-purāṇa from one Jagaddāśa Mīrā.¹ All the poets of these age were in favour of providing entertainments to the common people. They also did not feel it obligatory on their part to follow the original scriptures on all occasion.² Unlike poets of the age of Śaṅkaradeva, these poets did not aim at propagating Vaishnava religion through their writings. Their chief aim was to create poetic sentiment (rasa). While composing their poems, they would occasionally incorporate some extra episode and created homely atmosphere by their imagination, even when they were generally loyal to the original. While describing something, they would use similes, allegories, etc., as and when deemed necessary.

2. (a) M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, p. 51
   (b) daiva vāni nuhi ito laukik he kathā eteke ihāra doṣa nalaiḥ sarvathā
   - Rāmāyana, v. 3993
In matter of rhyme schemes, besides such rhymes as payāra, dulari, chabi and jhumuri which were in use during the pre-Śaṅkaradeva period, we find the application of other rhyme schemes like lecāri, kusumamālā and jhunā or ekāwali as well. Usually, payāra was used in descriptive compositions, tripadi in emotional verses or those of lamentation and jhumuri was the rhyme generally for narrating battles. Again, it is found that the poets of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva age would incorporate their identities in their compositions and almost every chapter would close with colophon or bhanitā. This principle is found in mediaeval Assamese literature as well. Besides, in every variety of mediaeval literature, we find the use of a kind of artificial literary language. As in the literature of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva age, the use of a language interspersed with colloquial, Sanskrit and tadbhava words as well as derivatives can be regarded as a characteristic of mediaeval Assamese literature. Further, during the age of Śaṅkaradeva, we find the use of Brajabuli in bargit and Ankia-nāt; the use of such peculiar forms as karilanta, bhailanta, āchanta, pimpāra, etc., in many works; and the use polite (bhakatiyā) language in the biographies (caritputhis). Because of the pre-dominance of words of Sanskrit origin over colloquial words, the maintenance of appropriate gravity and solemnity between the original theme and the language has been noticed. Even though the poets of the Vaisnava age
wrote many books, they did not create literary works like the literatures of today by composing an original narrative based on the pre-dominance of their own thought and imagination. They followed certain rules and precepts in writing their books. The Vaiṣṇava poets chose only those themes for their books which were useful towards the propagation of Vaiṣṇava religion or some moral ideals. Those subjects which were opposed to Vaiṣṇava religion or which were of secular or worldly interest did not find place in their writings. The Pāṇḍīḷī poet Pitāmāra became the object of derision by Śaṅkaradeva because he had composed poetry of mundane interest.¹

Hence, the subjects of neo-Vaiṣṇava literature being religious and spiritual, we do not find the reflections of the weal and woe of the common people in that literature. The pictures of the personal lives of the poets are not reflected there. Of course, while taking the help of popular language or atmosphere in order to reveal the glory of some purāṇic characters, we also find them depicting some social pictures.

¹. "bilāpa kari kānde devī rukāmīni
kona anīgha khuna dekhi nāilā yadumāni"

- As cited in (a) Kathā-guru-carita, p. 96;
(b) Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, p. 115
It was this Vaiṣṇava literature which enriched the Assamese literature and came to be recognised as national literature. On the other hand, it refined the tastes and mode of thinking of the people and brought about the wave of a new awakening by its spiritual impact on the society. That is why Vaiṣṇava literature is replete with spiritual and social commotion.

The Vaiṣṇava literature can broadly be divided under the following heads: (1) Translation from the Sanskrit texts; (2) Narrative poems (Kāvya), (3) dramas, (4) songs, (5) Philosophical writings and (6) Prose works.

Translation works:

Vaiṣṇava literature is mainly based on translations, but the work of translations is not the same everywhere. In case of translations the poets followed the principle of give and take. In other words, they usually left out those matters which are full of abstract philosophic discourses and also those matters which are not conducive to the propagation of Vaiṣṇavism, but they would translate those matters word for word which are conducive to the propagation of Vaiṣṇavism. For instance, Madhavadeva has in his Nāmaghosa translated verbatim various slokas from the Gitā and the Bhāgavata. The writer attached no importance to tales. Besides, the
Vaiṣṇava poets in order to make the translation attractive tried to create local atmosphere. As a result they have added descriptions of the natural beauty, households, towns, seasons, manners and customs, food habits, festivals, dresses, ornaments, musical instruments, etc. of Assam in many a place. Besides, descriptions of the beauty of the hero and heroine, those of Kṛṣṇa's various limbs, narration of his various playful activities, the glory of devotion, the importance of Ekāsaraṇa Nāmadharma, acceptance of only one god that is Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu is no other than Kṛṣṇa or Kṛṣṇa is God Himself (kṛṣṇāstva bhagvān svayam); there is no other god to be worshipped but He. He is the greatest of all gods; and if one can be devoted to the feet of that god, one can easily win the Caturvarga i.e. dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa. These are the matters that found place in the translations or the poets incorporated with their imagination while translating. Sometimes if a verse in Sanskrit had to be translated into Assamese, the poets instead of using the exact equivalent in Assamese would apply Assamese idiomatic

1. anya devī-deva nakaribā seva
   nakhāibā prasāda tāra,
   mūrtiko nacāibā grho napāsibā
   bhakti haiba byabhicāra.
   - Bh. II, v. 545

2. pārijāṭhārana-nāt, p. 20
expressions. For instance, let us accept two Sanskrit verses out of the original tenth Book of the Bhāgavata-purāṇa,

evaṁ sa bhagavān krṣṇo vṛndāvanacaraḥ kvacit
yayau rāmamṛte rājan kālindim sakhibhivṛtah
atha gāvaśca gopāśca nidāghatāpāpīḍitaḥ
duṣṭam jalam papus tasyās tṛṣārttā visadūsitam

10.15.47-48

and let us compare it with Śaṅkaradeva's translation:

dineka govindaśeṣa baloka lagata nalai
āpunī melilā save gāi
gopa śīṣu sava same yamunāra tīre tīre
dhenugana phuranta carāi
jeṣṭha māsara ghora raudre pīḍileka āti
eko āra tṛṣāta najāni
kāḷira hradata nāmi nirantare garu gopa
pārai māne pile viṣapāni

10.10995

In this context, the comments made by Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua are worth noting: "To make the passage more clear and homely the poet rendered the expressions 'sakhibhivṛtah' and 'nidāgha tāpāpīḍitaḥ' respectively as 'gopāśīśusavasame' and 'jeṣṭha māsara ghora raudre pīḍileka āti'. For in Assam 'Jaistha' is particularly significant as a month of extremely hot days when pools and rivulets dry up and grasses in the
field are scorched by the hot sun."¹

In Vaiśnava literature, the translation sometime seems to be analytical. For that, the poets used to take help of other purāṇas and stories. For instance, Śaṅkaradeva has cited the example of the Kadamba tree (Nauclea Cadamba) near Kāliya lake. This tree could survive because once Garuḍa rested over it for a while when he was carrying amṛta (nectar). This tiny episode is not available in the original Bhāgavata and Dr. Barua presumes that Śaṅkaradeva might have borrowed the same from some other book.² He has rightly commented on the system of translation of Śaṅkaradeva as follows—

"In this way his translation endeavours to elaborate and to illustrate the different ideas and episodes of the original Sanskrit texts perfectly in homely and direct Assamese style so that even an illiterate man can appreciate and understand. The Assamese version of the Bhāgavata is therefore looked upon both as text and commentary of the original."³

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2. B.K. Barua, "Śaṅkaradeva : His Poetical Works", Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 71
3. B.K. Barua, "Śaṅkaradeva : His Poetical Works", Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 71
One notable feature of the literary age of Śaṅkaradeva is that the Bhāgavata-purāṇa, the Indian epics Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa have been reduced into Assamese verses by several poets. Śaṅkaradeva drew inspiration chiefly from the Bhāgavata. So he made an attempt along with some contemporary poets to translate the whole book into Assamese. Śaṅkaradeva undertook the rendering of the major portion of Books I, II, III, VII, IX, X and XII. Besides him, Ananta Kandali (Book IV, VI and a section of Book X), Kesāvacaraṇa (Books VII, and IX), Gopalacaraṇa Dvija (Books III, VIII), Kavi Kalāpacandra (Sections of Book IV), Śrī Viṣṇu Bhāratī (Sections of Book IV), Ratnākara Miśra (Sections of Books IV and V) and Hari (Sections of Book V) translated the work.

As regards the translation into Assamese of the Bhāgavata-purāṇa Dr. B.K. Barua rightly remarks - "It was really a very bold and extraordinary undertaking to render into a provincial language a venerable text written in the grand style of a classical language. ... The rendering of the Bhāgavata marks an era of renaissance in Assamese poetry; its literary influence on Sanskrit literature was manifold and immense and proved a shaping force upon Śaṅkaradeva's writings."

1. B. Kakati, ed., Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, pp. 69-70
The rendering of the great epic Mahābhārata into Assamese is a remarkable work done by Rāma Sarasvatī and some of his contemporary poets. Under the chief patronage of the Koc King Naranārāyaṇa, Rāma Sarasvatī rendered into Assamese nine books of the Mahābhārata, namely, Ādīparva, Sabhāparva, Vanaparva, Virāṭaparva, Udyogaparva, Bhiṣmaparva (a major portion), Dronaparva, Karnaparva, Gadāparva and Śāntiparva (Sāvitrī episode). In the Assamese versions original matters not strictly necessary for the main story are often eliminated. So J. Sarma rightly remarks, "We find only about one fourth of the original matter in the Assamese versions. Rāma Sarasvatī is true to the original and in almost all books retains the flavour of the original."²

Besides Rāma Sarasvatī other poets who translated some other books of the Mahābhārata into Assamese are Kamsāri Kavi, Gopinātha Pāṭhaka, Dāmodara Dāsa, Dāmodara Dvīja, Vidyā Paṅcānana, Rāma Miṣṭra, Śrīnātha Dvīja and Kaviśekhara.

The Rāmāyaṇa:

Although Mādhava Kandali, a predecessor of Śaṅkaradeva translated the seven cantos of the Rāmāyaṇa, the

1. Rāma Sarasvatī stated in the Vanaparva (vv. 840-41) that the King Naranārāyaṇa gave him all facilities for translating the Mahābhārata by supplying him with the entire collection of books and commentaries, providing with money and placing servants at his disposal.

2. B. Kakati, ed., Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 180
first (i.e. Adikānda) and the last canto (i.e. the Uttarakānda) are believed to have been lost. So Mādhavadeva and Śāṅkaradeva rendered Adikānda and Uttarakānda respectively. Another Vaiṣṇava poet Ananta Kandali a contemporary follower of Śāṅkaradeva also took the work of Mādhava Kandali before him and borrowed from his verses and idioms. Moreover he incorporated the Bhāgavata element into the epic\(^1\) which he mentioned in his book.\(^2\)

Narrative Poems (Kāvyā):

In order to preach Vaiṣṇavism among the mass people, the Vaiṣṇava poets not only translated the Bhāgavata and the epics, but also composed a good number of narrative poems taking episodes from the old text like the Bhāgavata, Visṇupurāṇa, Harivāmśa and some other purāṇas and epics. Śāṅkaradeva himself composed six narrative poems, viz., Hariścandra-upākhyaṇa, Rukmini-haraṇa-kāvya, Balichalana, 

1. U.C. Lekharu, 'Assamese Versions of the Rāmāyaṇa', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 222
2. Rāmāyaṇa kathā pade nibandhilo bhāgavata carccā kari hari kathā vine durghora kalite tarite keho napāri

(As quoted in the Asamlyā Sāhityyar Samiksātmak Itivṛttā, p. 159)
Amrta-manthana, Ajāmilopākhyaṇa and Kuruksetra. The excellent poet Madhavadeva had to his credit one kāvyā, namely, Rājasuya. Another Vaiṣṇava poet Ananta Kandali composed two kāvyas, viz., Kumara-harana and Mahirāvana-vadha. Centering around the characters of the Mahābhārata particularly the Pāṇḍavas, Rāma Sarasvatī composed the following narrative poems: Vijaya-vana-parva, Manicandra-ghosa-vana-parva, Puspaharana-vana-parva, Kālakuṭija-śosaka-vadha, Bhīma-caritra, Baghāsura-vadha, Kulaśastra-vadha, Jāmghāsastra-vadha, Jātāsastra-vadha, Pāṇcāli-vivāha, Sindhura-parva, Vyanjana-parva, Aśvakarnara-yuddha, Khatāsura-vadha and Vyāsāgraṇa. Most of the narratives are known as Vadhakāvyas. J. Sarma clearly writes - "In almost all the narratives, the theme is the death and destruction of demons representing all that evil. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī suffer temporary defeat and disaster, but are ultimately rescued because of their unshaken faith in and devotion to Śrīkṛṣṇa."¹

It is to be noted that in all the kāvyas we have a vivid picture of the different aspects of the Assamese society which has been discussed in the Chapters IV and V.

Drama:

One important medium of preaching the Vaiṣṇava religion among the masses was the drama popularly known as

¹ J. Sarma, 'Rāma Sarasvatī and His Works', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 185
Ankia-nāta. It was Śaṅkaradeva who first wrote "Assamese drama which was almost entirely a native growth and although its frame-work was borrowed from the classical Sanskrit drama, its integral parts were made up entirely of indigenous materials." These dramas exercised a tremendous influence on our social and cultural life.

On the basis of the subject matters taken mainly from the Bhāgavata-purāṇa Śaṅkaradeva wrote Patnī-prasāda, Kālī-damana, Rāsakṛṣṇā, Rukmīṇī-harana and Pārijāta-harana plays. The story of his last play Rāma-viṣṇu was borrowed mainly from the Rāmāyana. It is to be noted that Śaṅkaradeva used in his plays an artificial language called Brajabuli or Brajāvali bhasā. Mādhavadeva is said to have to his credit nine playlets, namely, Arjuna-bhanjana, Cor-dhara, Pimparā-gucowā, Bhūmi-lołowā, Bhojana-bihāra, Brahmā-mohāna, Rāsa-jhumurā, Bhūsana-herowā and Kotorā-khelowā. Out of these the first five playlets are genuine where as the last four are believed to be spurious. In all the playlets the frolicsome activities of Boy-Kṛṣṇa as described in the Bhāgavata and the Krṣṇakarnāmṛta of Līlāśuka have been depicted. The language of the plays are like that of the dramas of Śaṅkaradeva is

1. K. Medhi, 'Origin of the Assamese Drama', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 191
Brajabuli. Except Arjuna-bhañjana all other playlets of Mādhavadeva are called jhumurā and Arjuna-bhañjana is called vāṭrā. Gopāla Ātā another dramatist and a chief disciple of Mādhavadeva wrote three plays, namely, Janma-vāṭrā, Bokā-vāṭrā or Pacati and Gopi-uddhava-samvāda. The plots of his dramas are taken from the Bhāgavata. The next dramatist was Rāmacarana Ṭhākurawho wrote only one play, namely, Kamsa-vadha. Besides, name of two other dramatists of the period under review may be mentioned. They are Bhūṣaṇa Dvīja and Daityārī Thākurā.

The former wrote Ajāmila-upākhyāna and the later had the credit of writing Nṛsiṁha-vāṭrā and Syamanta-harana. It may be mentioned that the Assamese dramas popularly known as Ankiā-nāt played an important role not only in propagating the Vaiṣṇava faith among the common people but also in developing fine arts and culture in the land. Regarding the merits of the drama Kaliram Medhi rightly remarks, "It should not, however, be forgotten that Śaṅkaradeva took the framework of his plays from the Sanskrit drama and used the ancient pantomimic art of Assam to complete his work. Assamese drama is a native growth and probably the first in India in point of time. Śaṅkaradeva gave birth to a regular vernacular drama and introduced vernacular prose first in India."¹

¹ K. Medhi, 'Origin of the Assamese Drama', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, pp. 191-92
Bargītā and Bhatimā:

As in Aṅkiā-nāṭ Śaṅkaradeva was a pioneer in other branch of early Assamese literature, namely, *bargītā* or devotional songs and *bhatimā* or panegyrics. It is stated in the *Kathā-guru-carita*¹ that Śaṅkaradeva composed two hundred and forty devotional songs, but the manuscript of the songs was consumed by fire as a result of which only 34 songs survived. Afterwards Mādhavadeva composed 157 bargītas at the command of his master. So we have altogether 191 bargītas in Assamese literature. As regards the characteristics of the bargītas of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva M. Neog rightly remarks that "while the greater number of songs of Mādhavadeva centre around the childish pranks of Kṛṣṇa the majority of Śaṅkaradeva's lyrics point to the futility of the world and urge upon us the necessity of repetition of God's names and attributes on our lips and of meditation on the Supreme Being within our heart."² For it may be noted that "the popularity of bargītas, the prayer-songs grew rapidly as the Vaisnava code had laid down singing of prayers as an obligatory daily duty and it was considered an essential part of liturgy. Further singing of hymns became a medium of preaching and propaganda. Śaṅkaradeva therefore created a system of

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1. *KGC*, pp. 212-13
2. M. Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times*, p. 179
devotional services, both congregational and private, known as Prasaṅga and Nāma-kirtana, and also established institutions to train singers (Gāyan and Bāyan). In the Vaiṣṇava church of Assam, singing is universal even to-day."¹

Like the Aṅkīa Nāṭas the bargītas were also composed in an artificial speech called Brajabuli, a mixed Maithili-Assamese language. It was almost a custom of mediaeval Vaiṣṇava poets of Assam, Bengal and Orissa to use such a literary medium.

Bargītas played an important role not only in propagating Vaiṣṇava faith but also in enriching music and literature in Assam. In the bargītas we find the blending of lofty thoughts with artistic sublimities. Numerous similies, metaphors, alliterations and other figures of speech are the added attraction of literary beauty of the bargītas. It may be mentioned in this connection that imitating the style of writing and also the subject matter of bargītas, some of the Vaiṣṇava poets like Bhavānīpuri Gopāla Ātā, Rāmānanda Dvīja and Rāmacaraṇa Thākura composed a good number of songs which are called Gīta.²

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¹ B.K. Barua, 'Śaṅkaradeva : His Poetical Works', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 98
² S.N. Sarma, Asamiyā Sāhityar Samikṣātmak Itivṛtta, p. 207
Like the _bargitas_ the _bhatimās_ (panegyrics) are a class of lyrics which is of eulogistic and descriptive character. _Bhatimās_ composed by Śaṅkaradeva may be classed into three divisions: _deva-bhatimās_ or eulogy of god (Krṣṇa or Rāma), _rāja-bhatimās_ or panegyrics of the king and _nāta (dramatic)-bhatimās_. To these Mādhavadeva added a fourth division, viz., _guru-bhatimā_ or panegyric of the preceptor. Besides _bargitas_ and _bhatimās_ we have two other types of songs known as _Capaya_ and _Catihā_.

**Kirtana-ghosā:**

One outstanding literary production of Śaṅkaradeva is the _Kirtana-ghosā_ or simply a _Kirtana_. It is not a single poem but a selective collection of twenty six sections comprising about 2261 couplets in _payāra_, _duladī_ and _chabi_ metres. Most of the sections like the _Ajāmila-upākhyāna_, _Prahlāda-carita_, _Hara-mohana_, _Bali-chalana_, _Gajendropākhyāna_, _Śīśu-līlā_, _Rāsa-krīḍā_, _Kamṣa-vadhā_, etc., are adaptations from the _Bhāgavata-purāṇa_. Two of its sections, viz., _Sahasra Nāma Vrtṭānta_ and _Ghunucā_ were composed by Śaṅkaradeva's two disciples, namely, Ratnākara Kandali and Śrīdhara Kandali respectively. _Kirtana_ means recitation and each poem of the _Kirtana_ bearing a _ghosā_ or refrain was composed for the purpose of reciting in religious congregations and services. The book exercises tremendous
influence upon the mind and thought of the Assamese people even today. Barua rightly observes that the Kīrtana "is looked upon with the same religious feeling and reverence as Rāmacarita-mānasa of Tulasidāsa in northern India."\(^1\)

Śaṅkaradeva composed a little but notable hand-book, namely, Guṇamālā (garland of praises to Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa) based on books X and XI of the Bhāgavata.

Philosophical Writings:

Śaṅkaradeva, Madhavadeva and some of the Vaiṣṇava poets not only composed songs, plays and narrative poems but also wrote some books on Vaiṣṇava philosophy. Śaṅkaradeva has the credit of writing such four books, viz., Bhakti-pradīpa, Anādi-pātana, Nimi-navasiddha-saṃvāda and Bhakti-ratnākara. In Bhakti-ratnākara Śaṅkaradeva analyses the various elements that constitute bhakti. He further emphasizes on śrāvāṇa (listening to) and Kīrtana (chanting of God's name). The book Anādi-pātana deals with cosmological matters. Śaṅkaradeva's Nimi-navasiddha-saṃvāda is a doctrinal treatise. It deals with the nature of the Bhāgavata religion, bhakti, māyā, etc. Bhakti-ratnākara is

\(^1\) B.K. Barua, "Śaṅkaradeva : His Poetical Works", Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 75
an important treatise in Sanskrit compiled by Śaṅkaradeva
from different text in support of his Vaiṣṇava philosophy.

Like his guru, Mādhavadeva had to his credit some
philosophical writings like the Nāma-ghosā, Bhakti-ratrāvalī,
Janma-rahasya and Nāma-mālikā. Nāma-ghosā is the monumental
literary work of Mādhavadeva. It consists of one thousand
verses. So the work is also known as Hejāri-ghosā. It is
divided in three sections. The first section extols Nāma-
dharma as the universal religion. The second section called
śaraṇa-chanda is a collection of lyrical stanzas of self-
effacing devotion. The third section called nāma-chanda is a
series of metrical arrangements of the names and attributes
of Viṣṇu meant for the purpose of singing in private or
congregational services. About the merit of Nāma-ghosā T.N.
Sarma writes:

"Nāma-ghosā is the record of religious experiences of a
genuinely devoted soul and it may also be regarded as
expression of spiritual craving of a whole generation of men
stirred to a religious quest by diverse thoughts-currents
and practices of the day. It embodies the teachings of his
guru, his own findings after a careful study of the sastras
and above all the truth he realized in his own heart."1

1. T.N. Sarma, 'Mādhavadeva and His Works', Aspects of Early
Assamese Literature, p. 166
Mādhavadeva's Bhakti-ratnāvallī is a metrical rendering of Sanskrit Bhakti-ratnāvallī of Viṣṇupuri. It deals with nine kinds of Bhakti like Śaṅkaradeva's Dasāma and Kirtana and Mādhavadeva's Nāma-ghosā, Bhakti-ratnāvallī is regarded as one of the four sacred books of the Mahāpuruṣā Sect. Mādhavadeva's Nāma-mālikā is the metrical rendering of a Sanskrit anthological work of Puruṣottama Gajapati. The work extols the merit of Holy Name of Viṣṇu.

Like Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva other Vaiṣṇava writers like Bhaṭṭadeva and Ratnākara Kandali wrote books on philosophy of Vaiṣṇavism.

Prose Works:

Although most of the Assamese books of the mediaeval period were written in verse, prose works of the same period were also produced. The use of prose is first found in Anklyā nātas of Śaṅkaradeva. It may however be noted that the language of that prose is not chaste Assamese of the time of Śaṅkaradeva. In the dialogues of his plays Śaṅkaradeva used a mongrel dialect called Brajabuli, an artificial language. Barua observes that "though originally sprung from Maithili, Brajabuli may be called a sub-Assamese language for it was nurtured and nourished by Assamese poets
and writers. The dialogues of the plays are rhythmic and read like musical prose. In some cases the last words of consecutive sentences would end in rhyme. Many colloquial and homely expressions are also noticed in this prose. Like Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhava-deva and other vaisnava writers used Brajabuli language in their dramas and songs. Thus the Ankiyā plays made contributions in the development of early Assamese prose. Next to Ankiyā dramas we find prose works of Vaikunṭhanātha Kaviratna Bhāgavata Bhāttāchārya, popularly known as Bhāttadeva. His chief prose works are Bhāgavata-kathā or Kathābhāgavata (the Bhāgavata in prose), Gitākathā or Kathā-gitā (the Gitā in prose) and Kathā-bhakti-ratnāvali (the Bhaktiratnāvali in prose). In Ankiyā drama we get only earliest specimens of Assamese prose but Bhāttadeva directly and mainly used prose for literary treatment. It was through him that the standard of Assamese prose was raised to such an extent as to express high spiritual matter. Generally Bhāttadeva employed short sentences and Assamese and Sanskrit vocables side by side for his language was homelier and closer to raciness and tersness of the spoken speech.

It may be mentioned that noticing the prose style of the Kathā-gitā Acharya P.C. Roy, the noted scientist and

1. B.K. Barua, 'Early Assamese Prose', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 126
savant of India says "Indeed the prose Gitā of Bhaṭṭadeva composed in the sixteenth century is unique in its kind. It is a priceless treasure."\(^1\)

Bhaṭṭadeva was a great Sanskrit scholar. Though he employed artificial Assamese as medium for prose, he used large number of tatsama words.

In case of rhymes it is observed that the poets of Assamese literature of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era of Assamese literature, namely, Mādhava Kandali, Harivara Vipra, etc., used pada or payāra, duladi, chabi and jhumuri metres in their compositions, whereas the poets belonging to the Śaṅkaradeva era of Assamese literature and also those poets of the succeeding period not only used these metres but also employed a few new metres, viz., long tripadi or lechāri, kusumamālā and jhunā or ekāvali. Generally pada was used in ordinary descriptions, tripadi in emotional and pathetic descriptions, lechāri in the descriptions relating to prayer implorations and mourning and jhumuri in describing combat, war, etc.

\(^1\) As quoted in Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 131
During the time of Śaṅkara-deva we find a class of Assamese literature which may be termed as pācālli literature or lyrical Kāvyas in choral songs. The word pācālli derives itself from Sanskrit pāncālī or pāncālikā, a doll. Dr. Neog assumes that "this form of poetry was connected with the ancient amusement of puppet-play, especially popular in the countryside."¹ The lyrical Kāvyas were meant to be sung generally by a group of singers known as ojāpāli. The lyrical kāvyas were free from Neo-Vaiṣṇava influence.

Mankara and Durgāvara Kāyastha two contemporary poets of Śaṅkara-deva composed songs relating the glorious episodes of the snake-goddess Manasā and her quarrel with a merchant Candradhara by name. Another Manasā poet named Sukavi Nārāyanadeva who flourished in early seventeenth century A.D. also composed an imposing Kāvyā called Padma-purāṇa relating to the story of the snake goddess Padmā or Manasā. The verses of the three poets are popularly known as Mankari, Durgāvari² and Sukanānī (Sukavinārayani) respectively. The verses are very popular and even today these are sung in

¹ M. Neog, 'Assamese Literature Before Śaṅkara-deva', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 47
² The Manasā songs composed by Mankara and Durgāvara are collected by Kaliram Medhi under the title of Manasā Kāvyā, and edited by Dr. B.K. Barua and Dr. S.N. Sarmā and published in 1952.
a chorus by a group of four or five persons known as ojāpāli on the occasion of the worship of the goddess Manasā or Durga. The songs possessing literary beauty are sung with some particular rāgas (primary modes of music) like Ahira, Suhāi, Rāmaqir, Bhātiyālī and Pattamanjarī, etc.

Another important poet writing pācāllis is Pītāmbara Kavi. He was contemporary of Śaṅkaradeva and lived in the town of Kamatā. Pītāmbara has to his credit four works; namely, Usā-parinaya, Nala-damayantī, the tenth book of the Bhāgavata and Mārkandeya-candī. Taking the story from the Harivamsa the poet composed Usā-parinaya in 1533 A.D. The poet narrates the love affair and marriage of Usā (daughter of Vāna) and Aniruddha (son of Pradyumna) and a fight between Kṛṣṇa and Hara. The poet shows his poetic talent in describing the love episodes of Usā and Aniruddha. About his Bhāgavata-purāṇa Dr. Neog remarks that this "is more an adaptation than translation from the original Purāṇa."¹ In Mārkandeya-candī Pītāmbara narrates the story of goddess Candī and her fight with and victory over several demons in a simple language. Like Usā-parinaya Nala-Damayantī is a pācālī Kāvya where the poet very affectively narrates the pang of separation of the King Nala and the queen Damayantī. As

1. M. Neog, 'Assamese Literature Before Śaṅkaradeva', Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 52
regards the poet Pitāmvara Neog rightly remarks: "Pitāmvara is one of the most considerable poets of the age. Probably next to Mādhava Kandali he is the most prolific of the pre-Saṅkaradeva writers. A scholar of great merit, he is a poet and musician of no mean degree."¹

Durgāvara Kāyastha, the Manasā poet composed a Kāvya named Gītī-rāmāyana. Unfortunately the Ādi and Ayodhya Kāṇḍas of the version now available is missing and Lankā and Uttara Kāṇḍas are composed summarily. However, the work is full of lyrical beauty though most part of it is a popular version of Mādhava Kandali’s work. Gītī-rāmāyana was primarily meant for the use of Ojāpāli. Chorus is sung with rāgas, namely, Ahira, Basanta, Śrīgāndhāra, Devamohana, etc.

The various writings of the poets of pre-Saṅkaradeva age, the age of Saṅkaradeva and the pācālī poets under review reflect the social conditions of the respective ages. In the following chapters an attempt is being made to study the different cultural aspects of the Assamese society as reflected in Assamese literature under review.

¹. Aspects of Early Assamese Literature, p. 53