Religious sects: If we are to discuss in details the history of the river Ganges, we should first start with her origin. Similarly when we begin to discuss about any religious sects we see that the biographies of the preachers are its origin. In spite of the advent of the saints from time to time, the sectarian attitude of the human beings were not abolished. Specially in India, n the medieval period, first we observe the existence of strict sectarian system, then the religious sectariam. In the 15th century, Jālā KaVirdās tried to cluster all the sects keeping aside all their sectarian differences. From the biographies of different saints of different times, we find that in promulgating the superiority of truth, they tried to show through love and services the path of justification of getting birth as human beings.

Jesus Christ, being born in a darken age, bestowed light upon human beings. His teachings gave new life to the Romans. The religion which he promulgated is known as "Christianism". Lord Buddha also showed the path of salvation. Hazarat Mohammad, taking birth in the 16th century A.D., bestowed the light upon the biased human beings. He preached the "Islam" religion.

In Arabian, the word "Islam" means dedication to God.\textsuperscript{1} In modern age, the word has been explained as "I shall love all

\footnote{\textit{Vīśva-paricay}, P. 124}
mankind''. It also means "Peace''. The people of ancient and modern ages believed Buddha as "God'', Jesus as the "son of God'' and Hazarat as a "Paigambor''. Christianity devoid of Christ, Buddhism devoid of Buddha and Islamism devoid of Hazarat were beyond their imagination.

According to Rabindranath, the faith of Jesus was 'the existence of God within human beings. This he perceived in his inner mind and for that reason till today, it spreads its new branches like an olive plant. Thus Jesus Christ saved many people of the world, and he saved the people from their in-differences also. This human interest came from Jesus Christ. Jesus, the 'son of God' had shown the new path of sublimity to the human beings.

In the medieval period, other saints lie Kavir, Dādu, Nanak Jāisī and Sūfī etc. never confined their God in a limitation. The meditation of Kavir was the meditation of human beings. Dādu, being born in the critical days of India, preached the people for unification. In his opinion,

"Sab ghat ekai ātmā, keyā Hindu Musalman''

(All Hindus and Muslims are the same)³

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2 "Rabindra-racanāvalī'' - Vol XI, P. 510
It has been observed that in the medieval period, the saints directly observed the existence of God in the human beings. To them, men were superior to the śastras. In the period from the 15th to 16th century A.D., the medieval saints spoke about those human beings, that were free from religious limitations. The Bāuls of Bengal also did the same.

Before the establishment of Pathan and Mugal empire, rigidity of casteism was prevalent in Hinduism. This rigidity weakened the foundation of the Hindu society. Besides that, on account of the pressure from the Pathans and the Mugal powers, the conversion of religion from the Hindu society ensured. So, during this period, the necessity of the social unity in the Hindu societies was felt. For not having casteism in Islamism, the Sūfī saints influenced the Hindu saints. As per necessity of that age, those who came forward were Caitanya and Nānak. Nānak, the founder of Sikhism in the Punjab, made spiritual protests against the current Hinduism and Islamism.

(A) ASSAM

The society of Assam was composed of diversive elements. The Tibeto-Burman tribes dwelt on and beyond the Assam range of mountains (the Mismis, the Mikirs etc.). In the plains below lived the Cutiyas, Koches etc. These Cutiyas ruled over the extreme east of Assam. The Kamata Kingdom was situated to the extreme west. The Ahoms conquered the North-Eastern parts of Assam and began to rule the country with vigour. The Bhuyāns

3 Ibid., P. 386
held their principalities of varying sizes in different parts of the country. So, when the poet-artist and mystic Śaṅkaradeva was born in the middle of the 15th century, then the majority of the people of Assam had no uniformity of religion and language. Most of them belonged to Non-Aryan tribes. The country was disunited through various jarring religious sects. Those who belonged to Hinduism were adherents to Śaivism, Śaktism, Vaisṇavism and Nāthism. Here a short picture is given below about the various religious cults practised by the people of Assam of medieval period.

Śaivism: From the pre-Śaṅkara period, people had a knack for worshipping Śiva. Śiva-worship was first introduced in early Assam by Jalpesvara, a King of North-Bengal which was formerly included in the kingdom of Kamarupa. The Skanda-Purāṇa narrates the story how the King Jalpa came to be a Śiva-worshipper. Rājā Naraka was also a votary of Śiva. According to Yogini-tantra, the number of Śiva-linga in Assam was more than a crore. The King of Cooch-Bihar claimed their descent from the Lord Śiva. Śaivism was also a living religion when Śaṅkaradeva was born. His father Kusumvarā who had no issue till an advanced age, is said to have worshipped Śiva and through His favour, he got his son Śaṅkara. We also find that Śiva was worshipped both according to Hindu and tribal rites. Both nirāmiṣa and samiṣa victuals were

5 "Avantya Khanda", chapter - 66
6 2.5 29-31
7 Anon, 'Katha Guru-carita', P. 21
offered to Śiva. The Bodo people offered samiṣa victuals to Śiva. Śiva is chiefly known as Vairava in many parts of Assam and was worshipped with extreme left-handed practices. This Śiva-worship was a living religion when Śaṅkaradeva was born.

Śāktism: Śāktism or the worship of "a goddess of many names and forms, who is adored with sexual rites and the sacrifice of animals, or when the law permits, of men," became the biggest religion of Kamarupa by the beginning of the second millennium of the Christian era. The Nilacal hill near Guwahati with the Yonipīṭha of Kamākṣā became the centre of this religion. The various images of the Goddess Śakti found in different parts of Assam. Such as Kecaikhati of Sadiya, Kamākṣā of Kamarupa, Vairavi of Sonitpur and Jayantīśvarī of Jayantapur, were worshipped according to Tāntric rituals.

Both the chief scriptures of Assam Śāktism, the Kālikāpurāṇa and the Yogiṇī tantra, belong to the left-hand or extremist school of Śāktism and enjoin blood-sacrifices. The Kālikāpurāṇa mentions the objects of sacrifice as almost all kinds of birds and animals including votary's own blood and flesh in small quantities. Human-sacrifice was also prevalent. In 1565 A.D. the Koch-King Naranārāyaṇa reconstructed the temple of the Goddess Kamākṣā.

8 Suryakharı Daivājna, *Darrang Rāj Vaṇśāvali*, PP. 50-53
10 Chapter - 71
Throughout the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, however seems to be Sāktism. Most of the Bara Bhuyās and the ancestors of both Sāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva were staunch Sāktas. The name of Sāṅkara's great-grand-father (Candīvara) is a Sākta one. Candīvara is said to have been born as a boon from Candī.11 A stone-image of Candī was the object of worship in the house of Sāṅkara's father Kusuma.12 Sāṅkara's disciples Mādhava and Ananta Kandali were great sāktas. Mādhavadeva in his first encounter with Sāṅkaradeva, offered quite a number of arguments in defence of Sāktism. Besides, the Goddess Manasā, Goddess Śītalā, God Dharmarāja and many other gods and goddess were also worshipped in the country.

Vaiṣṇavism: The worship of Viṣṇu was evidently prevalent in Assam on or before the 15th century. This worship was associated with the Tāntric elements and the tenets can hardly be compared with those of the Vaiṣṇavism preached later on by Sāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva.

The worship of avatāra or incarnation, is, of course, a notable feature of Vaiṣṇavism of that period. The most important avatāra of the Vaiṣṇava cult is Kṛṣṇa, whose account became the main theme of early Assamese literature. Another avatāra is Hayagrīva (Viṣṇu with horse-head). Under this name, he is

11 Anon, "Kathā-Guru-carita", P. 8
12 Ibid., P. 20
especially worshipped in Assam even today in the Hayagrīva-Mādhava temple at Hajo.

Nāthism: Nāthism seems to have prevalent in Assam from before the time of Śāṅkaradeva. They are also known as Yogīs, various forms of Yoga practices having been once cultured among them. They are a branch of the Śaiva-sect although it is asserted that Nāthism derived its inspiration from the Vajrayāna. Nāthism today is scareely traceable in Assam, but some influences of Nātha legends are still to be felt in Assam folk-songs.

Other minor cults: Again, due to confused mixture of different Hindu and Buddhist Tantric cults, a mysterious atmosphere was created in the country. The "Kathā-Guru-carita" speaks of two Buddhist-magicians (bauḍha matiyā ṭaṭakiyā) who practised magic at Belguri. 13 There were also various types of magic rites among the different tribes of Assam such animistic beliefs and usages were prevailed among the uneducated common people of the Hindus of the plains.

There was also a huge mantra literature in Assam. There was a class of medicine man, called "Byāja" (Vaidya) or "Ojhā" (Upādhyāya). They were also known as "deo mānuah" (god-man). People feared them as like as the spirits.

13 P. 45
There was a large mass of spells and incantations meant to cure people of snakes-bites known as "Dhāraṇī mantra". The word 'dhāraṇī' is an echo of the term Dhāraṇi of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Incantations of snake-bite date back from pre-Śaṅkara times, but the Vaiṣṇavas were debarred from using them in any form. When a snake had bitten Govinda Ātāi, he chanted "Rātrana!", for which Śaṅkaradeva took an offence on him. As per "ekā-jaraṇa-nāma-dharma" the devotees could not chant any mantras. We find this type of mantras in the biographical description of Śaṅkarācārya, in the 8th or 9th century.

In western Assam, Dharmapūjā was also observed with Manasa puja. Behula of course with her dead husband set out for this Dharmadeva, Ananta Kandali was a great scholar,

"Ṭhāthāpi Hari bimukh śākta, Dharma puja"¹⁵
(Yet he is a non-Vaiṣṇava, that is śākta, worships the god Dharma)

Speaking about the prevailing religion and diverse sects of the country, Hiuen-Tsiang remarked that there were as many as hundred Deva temples in Kamarupa as well as the shrines of other sects. So a peculiar atmosphere was created in the country for the admixture of different cults. People were degraded spiritually. Majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes having different religious beliefs and customs and many of the general Hindu rites and customs were observed. From the medieval

¹⁴ Maheswar Neog, "Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam" P. 91
¹⁵ Anon "Kathā-Guru-carita", P. 41
biographies a picture is also drawn that the Brahmins of Kamarupa did not observe the rules of Brahmaçārya and the vow of Ekādaśī. Thus religion was reduced to a mere form.

After the downfall of the Palas in the 12th century, there was a chaos and confusion in the country. In Kamarupa, people used to conduct themselves according to their sweet will. They used to worship village-gods (grāmadevatā), but none Hari (Viṣṇu).¹⁶

The medieval biographies help us to know how in such adverse situation, Śaṅkaradeva preached his nāma-dharma. And after his death conflicts ensued not only between Dāmodaraveda and Mādhavadeva, but also among the disciples of Mādhavadeva and a kind of spilt was observed in the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Assam and the Vaiṣṇava sects in Assam started to break into groups. In the satras of Rudrasimha's period, various types of worshipping different gods were observed along with Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa.

(B) BENGAŁ

Śāktism: In Bengal also, Śāktism was a very important cult, Jayānanda undoubtedly was a Vaiṣṇava, yet at the request of his country-men, he oblated 'Śakti-devī' at the beginning of his kāvya.

'Adā śakti caraṇe pranati ghane ghan śa

(I am saluting again and again to the goddess śakti-devī)

¹⁶ Satyendranath Sarma "The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam", P. 7
¹⁷ "Caitanya-maṅgala", Ādikhaṇḍa, P. 1
The poet again said that,

"Naše khat dīla rājā tabe Kālī chāre"\textsuperscript{18}

(The goddess Kālī pardoned the king (of Gaṅga) when the king touched the ground with his nose). The Śāktas vehemently opposed Caitanya's theme. This Śākta-cult was also accompanied by Tantricism and this Śākta-Tantric creed usually indulges in sacramental rites, blood-sacrifice, virgin-worship and the rituals consisting in the partaking of "pañca-makāra".

With the help of Tantras in the society some sorts of illegal works are going on. Though the then Vaiṣṇavas opposed the Tantras, yet in some cases they were also influenced by the Tantras. The Śākta-songs which were composed in the 17th and 18th centuries had got the inspiration from this Tantra. Even now in Bengal, the influence of the Vaiṣṇava and Śākta gurus are very strong.

In the later period, it was observed that due to the intensive influence of Vaiṣṇavism, the Śāktism was mainly observed by the Buddhist Tantrics. The goddess Tārādevī which is worshipped by the Tantric in the form of Kālī in the modern period, actually belongs to the Buddhist Tantric goddess. This influence of Tantra was so powerful in that age that when Caitanya used to sing songs, the non-Vaiṣṇavas presumed the following,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., P. 14
"Rātri kari mantra par-hipancā kanyā āne"¹⁹

(During the night-time, perhaps Caitanyadeva calls the Dakinis and Yoginis by uttering mantras)

Vaiṣṇavism: From the ancient period, we get the existence of Vaiṣṇava dharma or Vaiṣṇavism through different literatures and different sects. The followers of this Vaiṣṇavism were the worshippers of Kṛṣṇa i.e., they had full devotion to Viṣṇu. They belonged to the Bhāgavata sects - they were not Śaiva, Śākta or Tāntric. They were the followers of Viṣṇu, or Kṛṣṇa or Nārāyaṇa. After the advent of Caitanyadeva, the Vaiṣṇava sect among the Hindus was created. In the 12th century A.D. when the Muslim religion flourished in Northern India, the liberal attitude of Vaiṣṇavism helped the Hindu religion to stand vigorously. Rāmānanda was the pioneer to convey this new message.

Caitanya was also the main person to promulgate this new religion. He gave stress on worshipping 'Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa' and performing 'Nāma-Saṅkīrtana', overing all his ideas, a new religion was created and that was named as "Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava dharma". This surge of Vaiṣṇava enthusiasm inspired by Caitanya's preaching the doctrine of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti, flown over the Bengal. The 'Sātānis' of South India were the most numerous sects. They were regarded as priests by other inferior castes. They were the followers of Caitanya and called themselves as Vaiṣṇavas.

¹⁹ Vṛndāvana Dāsa, 'Caitanya-bhāgavata', Madhya-khaṇḍa, P. 156
Vaisnavism of the time also could not escape its influence.

Sahajiyā and Nāthism: There were other two mystic cults, the Sahajiyā and Nāthism. They had equally erotic tendencies prescribing the doctrine of naturalism. The Buddhist Sahajiyās spread far and wide. A group of Bengalee Buddhist saints taking the name 'Neṭā' used to travel throughout the countries. The Buddhist temples of Bengal and Bihar at that time were the main centres of education and culture. From 16th century, this influence of the Buddhists was reduced in Bengal. In the 13th century, Rāmacandra Kavi-Bhāratī, the follower of Buddha, left the country for Ceylon for ever.

In the biography of Caitanya, we find that both Caitanya and Nityānanda defeated the Buddhists in debates. In Vṛndāvana Dāsa's kāvya it is stated that on his way to Advaita's house, Caitanya not only entered the house of a leftist-saint, but also taught him the value of Vaiṣṇavism. But in the lower society, the influence of the Sahajiyā Buddhists was more powerful. Being supported by Nityānanda and his sons, the Buddhist Neṭās were prevailing in the Vaiṣṇava society. From that time, the Nāthism, Buddhism and Tāntrism were strictly observed.

Other minor sects: Besides this, we get other minor sects like Āul, Bāul, Karta-bhajā etc. Apparently they were Vaiṣṇavas, but inwardly they had confidence in different secret practices. Though the Bāuls gave importance to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and Caitanya, yet they followed some private practices. Totārām, a Vaiṣṇava saint speaks of thirteen sub-sects. They are, Āul, Bāul, Karta-bhajā, Neṣa, Darbēś, Saṁ, Sahajiyā, Sakhibhekī, Smārta, Jāt-gosāṅī, Atībāri, Cūpādharī, Gaurāṅga-nāgārī etc. These thirteen sub-sects are always considered by a true Vaiṣṇava as the unholy associations and they have not been able to influence or affect the main stream of Vaiṣṇavism flowing through Bengal. These sub-sects also derived their inspiration from the emotional preachings of the adherents of the Srikhanda group. Some Vaiṣṇavas were then said to be fond of eating fish and enjoying young women. They chanted the name of Hari only to keep an outward show of Vaiṣṇavism.

With a centre at Khardaha in West Bengal, Jāhnava Devī and Bīracandra, (the junior wife and son of Nityānanda) respectively wielded great influence over the people. Jāhnava Devī was accepted as a "Gosvāmini". They converted many low caste people into their faith and it is said that the so-called twelve-hundred Neṣa-Neṣī of East Bengal were

21 Bhaktivilāsa Bhāratī, "Apa sampradāyer Svarūpā" P. 2
22 Asit Kumar Bāndyopadhyay "Bāṅgla Sāhityer Itibṛttta" Vol III, PP. 529-31
converted to Vaiṣṇavism by Bīrācandra when he went to East Bengal. This sub-sect consisted of those Buddhists who did not have any respectable place in any society in India. At Srikhanda in West Bengal also, a section of Caitanyā's followers headed by Narahari Thākur grew up. This sub-sect believed in the esoteric form of worship of their Master Caitanyadeva. They went by the name Nāgarībhava.

We observe that the seed of decline was sown from the time of Nityānanda. Another sect was 'darbēś', i.e. Vaiṣṇava darbēś. Some of them were also known as 'Gaur Gadādhāra sect'. Besides this, we get lots of sects from the biographical literatures like Rāmādāsa, Haridāsa, Vamsādhārī etc. They were published by the names of their gurus as well as by the names of the idols they used to worship. People worshipped the goddess Mangala-candī, Sītalā, Manasā etc. In the first sloka of the copper-plate which was found in the excavation in West Bengal, many presume that there was some entities of Dharmaṭhākura too. 23

Bhakti was at its lowest ebb. It was confined to a small group of Vaiṣṇavas. Mādhavendra Purī and his disciples were the sponsors of this Bhakti-cult in Bengal. It is said that Advaita, a disciple of Mādhavendra Purī had been praying to God for sending a saint to save the Hindu society. Though he was a senior to Caitanyadeva but he had no hesitation to

23 Sukumar Sen, "Bāṅgāla Sāhityer Itiḥās", Vol I, Purvāraṇa, P. 14
accept Caitanyadeva as the Bhagavata at Srīvāsa's house. Under such religious condition, the advent of Caitanya was very much effective. His manner of worshipping of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and devotional songs gradually reduced the suprimacy of the Muslims over the Hindu society. The Muslims were attracted at the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. But Caitanya, during his lifetime did not establish any sect. Yet his 'Gaurīya Vaiṣṇavism' became so popular within a short time that it was divided into different sub-sects. As a result, a group of Vaiṣṇavas preferred to show devotion to curl-haired Caitanya and another group known a 'Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavas' preferred to worship 'Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa'.

As the theme of Jesus Christ was preached by Peter and Paul, thus through the disciples of Caitanya - the cell of Vaiṣṇavism was found. During his lifetime, he eagerly preached the Kṛṣṇa-bhakti - but never created any separate sect for it. The responsibility of spreading his opinion on religion was taken up by his disciples. If Sanātana, Jīva and Rūpa Gosvāmī did not work for him, it would not have been possible to spread Vaiṣṇavism inside and outside of Bengal. Although Caitanya possessed great qualities of leadership and extraordinary power over minds of men, he did not at anytime of his career concern himself with the organisation of his followers. Absorbed in his devotional ecstasies, he hardly ever

24 Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay - op.cit., Vol II, P. 267
The firm announcement of Caitanya —

"Morjāti, mor sevoker jāti nāi"26

(My worshippers and I have got no caste barrier)

— it created a great sensation among the Bengali society. In those days, the prestige of a man depended upon caste. But Caitanya protested against this tradition and showed his dislike against it. As a result, Vasudeva Sārvabhauma touched the feet of a Muslim named Haridāsa, to whom Caitanya said,

"Tomāre je kare śrādhyā āmāre se kare"27

(He who respects you, respects me)

In this respect Caitanya had got similarity with Guru Nānak and Rāmānanda. In this way, in the medieval period, the saints taught us that all are equal and so they strongly advocated the reformation of casteism and within the fifty years from the death of Caitanyadeva, a group of disciples compelled to tell about Śūnyavāda, Yogic, Tantric, Kṛṣṇabhāva etc. All the carita writers, like Jayānanda, Narakari, Vṛndāvana Dāsa, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kaviṛāj etc. expressed their self-theme through Caitanyadeva.

25 S.K. De, "Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal". P. 77
26 Vṛndāvana Dāsa, op. cit., Seśkhandā, P. 387
27 Ibid., P. 170
Vaiṣṇava biographies have found a special place in the socio-religious history. In the post-Sāṅkara period, the satras of Assam based on Vaiṣṇava biographies helped the writers in making the flow of Vaiṣṇavism stronger. These biographies also contributed much in the development and establishment of these satras. There was a strong relation between the biographies and the satras, and these satras gave birth to the Vaiṣṇava biographical literature in Assam. The satras have been taking prominent part in the religious and cultural life of Assam for more than four hundred years.

Now, the question is, what is the origin of the word "satra". Though this word might be of the Purānic ages or of ancient time, actually it is not so old. Giving information of the age of satra, Pratap Chandra Choudhury, after deciphering the stone inscriptions of Ambari, said that this has been prevalent since the 13th century. At that time, its name was 'Sābāśik Satra'. However the Ambari inscriptions are so old that Choudhury's acurrateness in deciphering them is also doubted.

This has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'satra'. In Sanskrit, it means a place of prolonged sacrificial session or a place of distribution of alms, "sat-tra", which

28 Satyendranath Sarma, "Satrar Utpatti, Itibāś āru Avadān" from the book "Satra āru Maṭh Mandirar Itibṛta" - P. 16
29 Ibid, P. 18
means journey towards the eternal abode. Therefore, satra means religious place, sacrifice, donation, house etc.

This name also seems to have been taken from the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' that when the saints were conducting the thousand-year long sacrifice, Śūta-Ugrasrava arrived there. On seeing him in their midst, the saints requested him to narrate the Bhāgavata explaining ŚrīKṛṣṇa's lilās (sports and diversions) to them. As the Bhāgavata was narrated there, so the Vaisnavas started to call the place of their congregation as 'satra'. Therefore, we can openly claim that the greatmen used this word and passed it on to the common people. But in some places, we come across 'sehi sthāne' in place of satra. For example,

"Tomār caraṇ cinti, yathāt bhakat thāke
Sehi puṇya, sehi tīrthasthan\(^{30}\)"

(That place can be termed as a sacred place where your devotees stay to pray to you).

The word "thān" is also used to be applied to a satra as it is done by Bhūṣaṇa. The compound "thān-satra" could also be substituted for 'thān' or 'satra'. It may be recalled that the daily sittings of the monks held in the open place or under the shade of trees. The word "Gosāin ghar" also used in some places. It is however, to be noted that the Vaisnava establishments of Assam are generally called satras. This word

\(^{30}\) Sāṅkaradeva, "Kīrtana-ghosā", P. 355
was possibly applied to Assam Vaiśnavism to mean an assembly of devotees where things about Viśnu or Kṛṣṇa were discussed. So, satras are the unique centres for the codification of religious rites and practices.

Towards the end of the 16th century, there was mushrooming of satras in Assam. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the kings were encouraging the people for constructing the satras by donating land, materials, money etc. Secondly, since most of the attendants of satra were family-men, so their children and grandchildren began their own satras after their death.\footnote{Tirthanath Sarma, "Āuniātī Satrar Buraṅī", P. 148} In this way, many satras branched out from the main satra.

It was the hundred years after the death of Śaṅkaradeva that biographical manuscripts witnessed a large scale development. After the death of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Dāmodaradeva etc. their biographies depicted them as re-incarnations of God. Thus the biographies of these gurus and other founders of the satras were written at this time and thus the biographical literature began to start. It is proved that the satras are the birth places of the biographies and to know the history of the development of satras, the reading of biography is a must. Almost all the biographies of that period give us all sorts of information about the satras. In the medieval period, different satras in Assam were
established. At first Śaṅkaradeva set up a satra in his ancestral village at Bardowa. In 'Kathā-Guru-carita' also, we find that in Belguri, Śaṅkaradeva,

"Pāce kīrtangṛha kari kathā śravaṇ, kīrtan ojā sabe bhakate śūne, gurujane kay"  
(In kīrtan- grha, the teacher speaks of devotion and the devotees listen to him).

Most probably, the first place selected by Śaṅkaradeva to give religious discourses and hold kīrtanas, was given the status of satra by the biographers. 'Kathā-Gurucarita' also mentions how Mādhavadeva in his efforts to activate the religion of 'eka śaraṇa-nāma-dharma' took the help of Nārāyaṇḍāsa Thākur and set a very beautiful satra at Barpeta. It was named as "Raṅgiyāl Gṛha". Its description has been given thus,

"Gote gṛha rajat subarṇar jena hol, bicitra ghar hol"  
(It seemed that the house has been decorated with gold and silver).

Almost all the biographers have given us vivid descriptions of this intricate designs and art of this 'Raṅgiyāl gṛha' in their respective works.

"Vibhīṣana ātai Parvatīyā, Kṛṣṇā ātai dui kārikare pātadvārat ātā phool kāticā..."  
(Vibhīṣana, Parvatīyā, Kṛṣṇā etc. artists are making designs on the satra-walls.)

32 P. 45
33 Ibid., P. 356
34 Ibid.,
In the beginning, satra simply denoted religious sitting of the devotees where the Bhāgavata used to be recited. But at the time of Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva, it got a definite shape. When the 'Raṅgiyāalgṛha' was burnt, MathurāDāsa reconstructed it in a big way. But the place where Mādhava used to read the 'Bhāgavata', was left untouched. Now-a-days, each satra has a square enclosure in which four gateways are provided in each side. The main temple consists of the nāmghar or kīrtana-ghar and maṇīkūṭa or bhaj-ghar. A wooden simhāsana is placed where a copy of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa or the image of Kṛṣṇa is placed for worship.

The biographies also help us to know that a Vāsudeva-image was discovered by Śaṅkara under the cover of earth and was installed in a separate house (maṇī-kūṭa).35 Around the maṇī-kūṭa and the nām-ghar there are four rows of huts (cārihāṭi) containing a number of rooms each intended for the residential accommodation of devotees. Some satras possess only two rows of huts. Thus usually a satra comprises four phases of construction—four gateways, nāmghar (prayer-hall) a maṇī-kūṭa (shrine) and some rows of huts.

When a new satra was established, one got some plots of land to stay. Mādhavadeva too, had got land at Sundaridiya.

35 "Bardowā-Guru-carīta", P. 58
Begging was the general means of livelihood for the monks. In the 'Kathā-Gurucarita' we find,

'Candarī-dāsī nāchil, bhikṣālai goichil' 36

(Candarī was not present there as she went out for alms.)

Financial matters: When a harvest was ready, the lay men brought the first fruits to the satra. 37 When the preceptor visited his disciples, then the offered money, clothes and other things were obtained. Rich men generally made valuable gifts or money. The idea of disciples paying a regular tax to the preceptor was probably of later origin. In later times, the levying of taxes became a regular feature of satra administration. A 'mazumār' was appointed to every satra to look after the accounts. One source of income was that from fines that were imposed upon the guilty. 38 There was a general store-house (bhāral) where the food-stuff and other necessaries were preserved.

Satra functionaries: The satrādhikāra is the head of the satra. He has to live a life of simplicity and to perform the religious duties with care. Many people as Bhāgavatī (reciter), Paṭhak (reader), Śravāṇīs (listeners), Gāyana-vāyana (drummers and singers), Naṭūwā (dancers) Devrās (distributors), Bhārālī (store-keeper) etc. of the satra help the head in the religious performances.

36 P. 210
37 Ibid., P. 242, 262
38 Ibid., P. 144
Initiation: It is called 'Sarana lowa', i.e. resorting to Krsna. It requires a guru for sarana. Generally the head of the satra initiates the devotee and on the previous day the candidate takes only a single vegetarian diet. On the day of initiation, the candidate after taking his bath, takes an oath that he is surrendering himself to Deva, Nama, Bhakat and Guru. After initiation, the devotee is conferred a consecrated rosary (mala) of 108 or 1000 beads. It is one of the main daily rites of the devotee. But some Vaishnavas of Assam, however, do not have the practice of counting the beads. The satras belonging to Nikā and Kāla samhatis, have no such rosary system.

Daily life of a devotee: After initiation, the life of a devotee becomes a life of dedication. Rising from bed, he should mark by which nostril he is breathing, then he should place on the earth the corresponding foot first. Then remembering his guru, he purifies himself with simple soil and water. After bathing, he should make imaginary sacred marks on spots of the body and then enter the domestic temple. If he has to cook, he should first put four handfuls of rice into water uttering to himself, 'Anna-brahma' and 'Nārāyaṇa' respectively. No food should be taken without cleansing of the body. When going to bed, he should utter the name of Kṛṣṇa. Water played a great role in the life of a person after initiation.

Worship: The Assam Vaiṣṇavas discarded the worship of image, though in some satras belonging to Puruṣa, Kāla and Nikā
Vaisnavas belong to Brahma-samhati only worship the image of the deity.

The main article that a Vaiśnava worships is a slab of stone (pada-sīlā), the foot prints of the gurus. Such shrines are known as 'pada-sīlāghar'. Another type of relic is the dust taken from the feet of the gurus (padadhūlā). In the Bali satra of Nowgaon Saṅkaradeva's feet-dust is preserved with care.

The speciality of some satras is the 'Eternal lamp' (akṣaya banti). When the 'Rāgīyāl grha' was established, Mādhava had lit an oil lamp in front of the teacher's seat. After the Rāgīyāl grha had been burnt, Mathurā Dāsa's wife lighted a new lamp from the embers and thus maintained the continuity of aksaya banti. 39

Festivals: Rās-yātra, Dol-yātra, Janmaśtamī and Bihu are the important festivals which are observed in a satra. In some satras, death anniversaries of Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are also observed and some of the satra also observe their saints' day.

Offences: For a devotee, any social offence is considered as a sin and for such a sin he can be punished or expelled from the satra.

39 Ibid., P. 513
Food: No boiled food is offered to God. A Brahmin never takes his food offered by a non-Brahmin. Fasts on ekādāsī are usually observed by the devotees.

Marriage: Marriage of higher castes should be conducted by a Brahmin priest. But in other cases, it should be conducted according to the traditional customs.

Caste-distinction: Caste-distinction is also maintained in social practices.

Dress: A devotee of a satra generally uses dhoti, cādar and gamochā. The head of the satra puts on a turban. The Vaiṣṇavas may use the sandal-paste.

Behaviors: The behaviours of a devotee are highly polished. Every devotee is addressed as a Atai (Sir), and they always utter the name of Hari or Kṛṣṇa or Rāma at the time of their conversation.

Fine arts: Paintings were practised in the satras. These paintings are found in the religious Aumiāṭī satra. Besides this, Astrology and Āyurveda were regularly practised at the time of Śaṅkaradeva.

Restrictions: Strict restrictions are imposed on the monks in respect of women. They may not bathe at the same ghāṭ as women, or frequent cloisters of married clerics. The monks must
have to attend to the routine of ceremonials. Women may get initiation but several restrictions are imposed upon them.

Funeral rites: The dead body is cremated, and the śrāddha ceremony is held after ten, twelve or thirty days. The devotees observe that ceremony only by chanting the name of Kṛṣṇa.

Mañḍhavadeva believed the religion of renunciation. Therefore, some satras believe in renunciation. We can cite the Kamalabari satra as an example of them. In this connection we cannot but remember Vāṁśigopāladeva, because he at first made the rule not to allow the authority of the satra to own any property. This is really an appreciable rule that we find in the history of satra.  

Śaṅkaradeva's two sons established many satras. Later, these satras gave birth to many more satras. Mañḍhavadeva is regarded as the real founder of the satra institution for he organised it on a firmer footing and introduced a very vigorous and disciplined monastic code. Śaṅkaradeva's religion has many institutional aspects and these exercise even today a tremendous influence on the cultural and social community life of the Assamese people. As an institution, it may be considered mainly in two major aspects - the satras and the nām-ghars.

40 Tirthanath Sarma, op. cit., P. 102
In this way, the satras came into existence throughout the length and breadth of Assam. As a result, Vaiṣṇava religion spread like wildfire in Assam. It won't be an exaggeration to say that the satras had a major contribution in the spread of Vaiṣṇava religion in Assam. This period of Vaiṣṇava religion is known as 'satrāyan paryā'. Thus the satras made a great appeal to the unsophisticated Assamese people and thus they commanded unprecedented popularity. The carita puthis may be considered to be the most realistic documents about the development of the satra institution of Assam. Of all the biographies, the 'Kathā-Guru-carita' is the most voluminous, complete, trustworthy and authoritative as it was compiled within the sacred precincts of a satra. It also throws much light upon the nature and structure of the satra institution and its administration.

(B) BENGAL

In Assam, we find that the satras founded by the principal followers of Sāṅkaradeva played an important role. But in Bengal, though there are different centres founded by devout ācaryas and parikaras at Khardaha, Santipur and many other places, which flooded Bengal with the bright light of Vaiṣṇavism, their contributions are limited. The Hari-sabhās are to some extent comparable to the nām-ghars of Assam. But these are very limited in number, so their influence is not as wide as the nām-ghars in Assam. 41

41 A.M. Mukherjee, "Vaiṣṇavism, Assam and Bengal", P. 103
The ākhrās and maṭhas of Bengal also have very limited activities and influence. They remain isolated from the common people. The devotees, who live in these institutions are limited and they also have a limited contact with the people who live outside the institutions.

So, as regards the contribution of these institutions of Assam and Bengal, we can say that the satras spread their influence into the very core of hundreds of Assamese villages and tribal areas and also impart literacy and learning among the laity. They also give special emphasis on the cultural activities which bind people in one common faith. Dr. S.N. Sarma has given an account of the percentage of the Vaiṣṇavas of Assam from the District Gazetteers of Assam (1905) according to which "eighty percent of the Hindus of Assam Valley are Vaiṣṇavites".  

But in Bengal, after the death of Caitanyadeva, Nityānanda etc. i.e. in the second half of the 16th century new leaders like Śrīnivāsa, Narottoma, Bīrabhadra etc. appeared. Their respective centres drew a large number of people to their fold. So as compared to Bengal, the contribution of the satras of Assam is much more.

42 "The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam", P. 190
POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONDITION AS DEPICTED IN THE BIOGRAPHIES

The medieval biographies also help us to know the various contemporary aspects of the countries. To judge it from that angle, these works act as history. But history deals with the lives and the dynasties of the kings, whereas the biographies deal with the life-stories of the Vaiṣṇava saints. Though these biographies were based on devotional grounds, yet like history, they covered the political, economic, social and religious aspects too. Here also the writers entered into their social lives in narrating their lifestories.

The biographical literatures of Caitanyadeva and Śaṅkaradeva stands as ideal literatures. To prove the above saints as incarnations of God, the biographers forwarded the real events through the supernatural wrappers. Yet these works vastly exposed their devotional earnestness, devotion, intensive explanation of the Vaiṣṇava doctrines, Vaiṣṇava society and the relation between the Hindus and the Muslims. In order to know intensively the society of that period, the tasks of taking resort to these caritas are inevitable.

(A) ASSAM

Political condition: Assam or Kamarupa or by whatever name this north-eastera part may be known, was politically and socially in the melting point in the medieval period. Assam
was the greatest kingdom in the east. For her political history of the 14th and 15th centuries, we have to depend upon the copper-plates, stone inscription and the guru-caritas.

In the 13th century, the Muhammadans invaded Kamarupa and Orissa at least three times, but they were beaten back finally by the rulers of Kamarupa of those days. Muhammadbin-Baktyar Khilji was the first invader of Kamarupa. He overthrew Lakṣmaṇ Sen and contemplated the conquest of Assam. The rock-inscription merely says that the Muslims came to Kamarupa. But it is not stated that they invaded Kamarupa. In the same century, two other Muslim chiefs - Giyāsuddin and Iktiyāruddin Yuzbek Tugril invaded Assam. After twenty years Hisamuddin Iwāq led the second Muslim invasion of Kamarupa. At that time, when Rājā Prthu was the king of Kamarupa in 1257 A.D., Malik Yuzbeg invaded Kamarupa and also captured the capital of Kamarupa (North Guwahati). But the rock-inscriptions at North Guwahati show that Muhammadan army entered Kamarupa, but it was destroyed. Therefore from the middle of the 13th century to the end of the 15th century Kamarupa was free from serious Muslim invasion for two centuries.

In the early part of the 13th century, the Ahom power was first established in Assam in 1228 A.D. and it was slowly going on expanding towards the west for the power

43 P.N. Dutta, "Glimpses into the History of Assam", P. 67
exercised by different Tibeto-Burma tribes. Along with them, the Cutias and the Kacharis ruled in some scattered portions of Assam. The founder of this Cutia kingdom of the 13th century was Bīrpāla. The Ahom customs were however not neglected. Friendly relations were maintained with the chief of Manipur. The Ahom territories now extended from the east of Sadiya to the Kalong.

This growing power of the Ahoms alarmed the Koches. So, in 1555 A.D., Naranārāyaṇa is said to have attempted to cultivate friendly relations with Sukhamphā. In 1562, Cilā Ray invaded the Ahom kingdom both by land and water. The greatest figures in the political history of this part were Naranārāyaṇa and Cilā Ray. In 1563, Cilā Ray marched up to the Ahom capital of Gargao.

In "Kathā-Guru-carita" we find,

"Ādi Vikrama ādi Gauṇḍavar, tār pāce Bhoja nām; tār pāce Puruṣa; tār pāce Kanna nāme. Tāk mārī hol Paṭhān". 45

(After the reign of Vikrama the first, Bhoja, Puruṣa and Kanna Gauṇḍa was occupied by the Pathans.) But the Koches were so powerful that these Pathans in their turn were defeated in a battle by the Koches, who ruled Gauṇḍa for three generations.

44 Ibid., P. 113
45 P. 8
During the reign of Narañarāyaṇa the power of Koch kingdom reached its zenith. He rebuilt the temple of Kamakṣa which the Muslims had destroyed. But when Cīlā Ray found himself a prisoner in Gauḍa as he, it is said, attacked the Bādshāh's domain. That was really the beginning of the fall of Koch power. Sāṅkaradeva's great great grand father was Chandīvara or Devidāsa. Chandīvara Bhuyān was the ruler of Kanaujapura and his fame reached the ears of Gauresvara when the Yavanas under the leadership of Husain Shāh made inroads in the domain of the Bhuyās. After the Yavana had retreated, Chandīvara with several of his Kayastha and Brahmin compatriots settled in the then Gauresvara's kingdom. The king Dharmanārāyaṇa seems to have been a petty chief, who held sway over a small principality on the Mahānandā. There was a dispute between Durlabhanārāyaṇa and Dharmanārāyaṇa. But both of them were devout worshippers of Chandī and through the intervention of the goddess, a treaty was concluded. The goddess Durgā gave order in the following manner:

"Mor bākye yuddha eri mitrawati ha"  
(Be a friend and give up war at my order)

Then the king of Gauḍa gave the Kamarupa king, seven families of Kayasthas and seven families of Brahmins. Chandīvara was their leader. He was then sent to Lenga-maguri and secured the

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46 Ibid., P. 9
47 Ibid.,
blessings of the local people. After that Candiva entered the Brahmanical world and settled at Rauta (in Darrang district). After his death, his son Rājadhara became Bara-Bhuyān after Rājadhara, his son Sūryavara, got the post. After Sūryavara's death, Kusumvara became Śīromoni Bhuyā during his Bhuyāship, the Kacharīs again became powerful. When Kusuma died, the Bhuyā country was assigned to the care of his uncles; Saṅkaradeva, after his return from school, took over the charge of Śīromoni Bhuyāship from his granduncle Jayantadalai. During his Bhuyāship - the Bara-Bhuyāni's head-quarters were removed from Ali-pukhuri to Tembuwani Bordowa. But they were again removed to their original place when Saṅkara was abroad. After that he was deeply engaged in the religious discussions when the Kacharīs menace again made its appearance. The Bhuyās had to remain in constant fear for the Kacharīs.

We find in different caritas that Saṅkara's group of Bara-Bhuyāns enjoyed some sort of autonomy, however meagre it might be by staying in the Ahom kingdom probably after the Koch invasion of 1546 A.D. This was the end of the Śīromoni Bhuyāship of Saṅkara's family. He was too happy to find himself completely free from the responsibilities of the Bhuyāship. Thus when the political scene of Kamarupa was full of trumoi, Saṅkara preached a reformed Vaiṣṇava faith in the reign of Maharājā Naranārāyaṇa in Assam. His appearance at that time was highly important in the history of Assam.
**Economic condition:** The carita puthis have well-described the economic conditions of the country. Most of the people were agriculturists. The saints like Mādhavadeva, Dāmodaradeva, Nārāyaṇ Thākur, Barviṣnu Ātā etc. were agriculturists at the beginning i.e. in their early lives. This was the general occupation of the people. Rich men engaged workers or servants for the purposes of ploughing. They could enable insolvent borrowers also to repay their money through such services. Śrīrāma was a hired man (muniṣ) at a rich villager's establishment. In the Ahom kingdom, we find a great number of slaves used to work in the private estates of the rich. They were bought and sold openly. The inhabitants of Kamarupa - Assam mainly depended on cultivation. People were engaged in different industries of cane, bamboo, cotton etc. The standard of such cottage industries was high.

People of various castes with various professions are mentioned in the biographies of the saints. Some of the professional castes (Vṛttiyā) were - the Baniyās or Goldsmiths, Sūtāras or carpenters, the Chaṇḍālas, the Kumārs or the Kumbhakāras, the Natas, Dhobās, Nāpits or Bārbers. Among the Vaishnava followers of Śaṅkara and Mādhava, Kamalāpati and Kṛṣṇa were Teēes i.e. oilmen and Haridāha was a Baniyā.

48 Hemanta Sarma, "Asamiyā Sahityat Droṣṭipāt", P. 185
49 Anon, "Kathā-Guru-carita", P. 102
50 Ibid, PP. 11, 117
51 Ibid., P. 197
52 Ibid., P. 203
Tātīs with their group-leaders called "Marals". Daityāri also mentions about the Kaivartas who caught and sold fish. These were the people whose profession made an indelible mark on their caste or social position though the people of all castes used to catch fish like the Kaivartas to eat in their houses.

Pāddy was the main crop as it was used as food. These plough-men, boat-men, wood-cutter etc were traders who dealt in various commodities. Some Muslims worked as tailors as well as Moriyas i.e. makers of vessels of brass-metal.

Others made their living by the traditional professions of their castes. As a Kayastha, Mādhavadeva got his training in the writer's profession (Kāysthāli vidyā) which included accounts.

Weaving was a common occupation of the people. Even ladies considered this as a part of their household duties. There were also professional weavers who worked on handlooms for their own sake. From remote antiquity, Assam enjoyed a reputation as producing silk of a high degree of perfection. It was the main profession or business of the Nāth community. The three varieties of Indian silk generally known as Pāṭ, Endī and Mugā are specially associated with Assam. The Ahom kings established a department of weaving and maintained skilled

53 Ibid., P. 145
54 Ibid., P. 111
weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes. The weavers received grants of rent-free lands and other favours in return for their services.

In the Ahom kingdom all valuable trade commodities were procured in good quantities. The subjects of the Ahom king gave gold, musk, silk cloth in exchange for salt, sulphur and certain other products in India. Gold-washing and manufacturing of jewellery was an important industry of Assam.

The caritas refer to mohor (coin), tākā, kaʔi (cowrie) etc. The 'Kathā-Guru-carita' refers to a Nārāyaṇī ādhali (half rupee). The cowrie shells also served as the medium of exchange.

Other resources were also plentiful. The soil of the Brahmaputra was also very fertile for cultivation. Even though, there were diseases.

"Jware khare dhari māre" ⁵⁶
(People were to die on account of natural calamities and fever).

Social conditions: Regarding social condition, we can say that the life and activities of Saṅkaradeva were also closely associated with the Assamese societies and culture. Saṅkaradeva travelled every corner of Assam and as a result, the Kirat, Garo, Miri, Rajak

⁵⁵ P. 149
⁵⁶ Ibid., P. 78
and other lower caste people were initiated into a religion which retains faith in one god only. He gave an opportunity to recognise value in the social and spiritual life of the discarded and neglected masses who were looked upon with contempt for centuries together. In Assam, an auspicious and new orientation ensued for which the Assamese social life abundantly enshrined. In this way the Assamese society stood independently. From different caritas, we get a contemporary beautiful social picture. The Brahmins held the important position in the Hindu society and were patronized by the Bara-Bhuyās and other rules. The Brahmin priests migrated from outside. The Kayasthas had to observe various rites in different times. The social customs and religious rituals of the Assam of the period receive detailed treatment in Rāmacaraṇa's carita. In the context of Śaṅkara's mother Satyasandhyā's death, we come across a description of the śrāddha ceremony performed on such occasions.\(^{57}\) The way the funeral pile is made for burning the dead, how it is lit, all these customs are vividly described here.\(^{58}\) Above all, the cordiality and sense of benevolence of the Assamese people are found here.

The author also shows us that there is a difference between the rituals of the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. On the fourth day of a person's death, 'Caturtha' is performed by a Brahmin, where the non-Brahmins perform 'Taryyāni' on the

\(^{57}\) PP. 138, 194, 198, 199

\(^{58}\) PP. 137 - 138
third day. 'Dahā' is performed on the tenth day by both the communities. In Ramānanda Dvija's work, the author states the customs followed at the time of death.59 The widows generally used white clothes, put off bracelets (sākhā) and rubbed off vermilion from their head. They also (particularly Brahmins and Kayasthas) took vegetarian food.

Regarding marriage, we have the information that dowry was prevalent in Assam. The "Vamśigopāladevar carita" is specially rich in depicting the dowry system in a reverse way. The bridegroom had to give some money to the bride's guardian for settlement of a marriage in those days.60 But this dowry system was not compulsory. In marriage, relatives made presents to the bride or groom in token of good wishes. From this point the carita of Ramacarana Thākur bears a special importance in its information on social customs. Marriage was held with the help of a match-maker (ghatak)

People had intense faith on dream. They believed the dreams as truths. For example, Lord ŚrīKrṣṇa was seen by Satānanda and Susālā in a dream before the birth of Dāmodaradeva. Such a dream by the parents before the birth of a Vaiṣṇava guru is very common. In Ramānanda's work also, it is used in a little different way. When the subjects here finds himself in a difficult situation and he does not know what to do,

59 "Vamśigopāladevar carita", PP. 196, 202
60 Ibid., PP. 7, 9
he is shown to have had a dream in which his problem is solved.\textsuperscript{61} This carita also describes how Gopāladeva with his bhaktas passed their days in constant terror.\textsuperscript{62} It also throws light on the administrative system of the satra under Gopāladeva.

At that time Daivajñas or grahavipras played an important role in the society as astrologers. When Śaṅkaradeva was born, an astrologer was immediately summoned. After the birth of Dāmodaradeva also, his horoscope was studied on the eleventh day and some rites were performed. There were also other rites accompanying nāma-karma, (the naming) anna-prāśana (first feeding with rice) etc. A pregnant woman, in her fifth month was offered 'pancāmṛta' (five things - milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar) In "Kathā-Guru-carita", we find this at the time of Mādhava's birth\textsuperscript{63} and also the rites accompanying child-birth.\textsuperscript{64}

The biographies also cite the name of goard, pumkin, bringle, sugarcane, sāli-paddy etc. Hu-en-Tsang gave an information about cultivation of jack-fruit and coconut in Kamarupa. In the coper-plate also, the name of the following

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid, PP. 17, 18, 23
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., P. 121
\item \textsuperscript{63} Anon, "Kathā-Guru-carita", P. 10
\item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid., PP. 20 - 21
\end{itemize}
fruits were mentioned - jack-fruit, (kantṭa-phal), Lakuch(āmlaki) etc. To entertain a guest, by offering 'Pān-Tāmbul' was the system. Sugar is also mentioned in the "Kathā-Guru-carita". The then kings knew well about the use and efforts or power of water. So, they selected the place of residence by experimenting the specific gravity of water of that area.

The country was not quite free from thieves and dacoits. Mādhava Kandali gave us information about the thieves. Besides this, gradification and classification did not allow the subjects to live peacefully. People did not touch the "Harijans". Men were purchased and sold. Slaves and maid-servants were presented to one king by another. Barugīts and Bihugītīs were very popular songs. The advent of the Fakirs and the various attempts to Sūfi-religions, literature as Assamese Vaiṣṇava kāvyas were very important of this era.

The medieval Assamese people were classified into two groups - one Aryan culture and the other Adibāsī or various groups under schedule tribe communities. But these schedule tribe peoples were initiated into Saṅkara’s Bhāṣaraṇa dharma. In the Hindu society, the classifications were based on rigidities and the groups of priests stood against the preaching of Vaiṣṇavism.

65 B.K. Barua, "A Cultural History of Assam", P. 86
66 P. 33
Education and learning: In the field of education, Assam was not backward. In the 13th century, poets and scholars were granted land by the Ahom rulers. Tols etc. were controlled by the Brahmin scholars (ojhās). Sanskrit was taught in the Tols. Ācārya, Kandali were the titles conferred upon the scholars in recognition of their special knowledge. Mahendra Kandali was a famous teacher. Hajo, Cooch-Bihar were the main education centres. Astronomy were keenly studied. Intelligent students used to go to Benares and Navadvip for further studies. Sāṅkara's forefathers were renowned scholars and Sāṅkaradeva himself met many a keen Brahmin controversialist. In "Kathā-Guru-carita" we find a big scholar named Chaṇḍīvarā. Victorious party was granted medals. Some religious books were copied and some other books were also found written at that period. Bakula Kāyastha wrote a book on arithmetic, Sridhara composed a work on astrology etc. In this way number of useful books were going on increasing.

Thus the medieval biographies help us know that the Hindu or Aryan religion and culture intensively and extensively spread throughout Kamarupa and Assam. But in many cases, it was antagonistic to the schedule tribe culture, and in some cases in combination with this culture, a new renaissance took place.

67 Ibid., P. 11
(B) BENGAL

Political condition: Upto the 11th century, Bengal was divided into pieces. The kings of the Sen-dynasty as, Vijay Sen (1095-1158), Ballal Sen (1158-1179), Laksmap Sen (1179-1205) reigned one after another. But in the 13th century, when Muhammad Ghuri won victory in the second war of Tarāín (1192 A.D), the Muslim rule ensued again. At that time, the Muhammadan devotees (Darbeśī), the Muhammadan medicants (Fakir) and the Sūfī saints came to India. After that, the Sultāns came one by one. Their administrative policy was also very strong. From 1338 A.D. upto 1538 A.D, the powerful Sultāns had been reigning. Caitanyadeva had been living during this period. 68

Prior to the birth of Caitanyadeva, Muslim rule continued in Bengal for about three centuries. Among the rulers, special mention should be made of Ruknuddin Bārbek Shāh and Ālāuddin Hussain Shāh. The dynasty founded by Hussain Shāh in 1493 A.D. came to a decline within 1538 A.D. His character was not spotless. He could not gain popularity like Ruknuddin. The interpretation of Muslim law prevailing in India at that time forbade the construction of new temples and Hussain Shāh followed the law strictly. When Caitanyadeva visited Ramkeli, Hussain Shāh acted somewhat different. Here the Sultān did not interfere with Caitanyadeva's religious activities.

68 Prasanta Kr. Dasgupta, "Mahāprabhu O Samakālin Bāṅglādeś", P. 20
After Hussain Shah, Sherkhān Sur laid the foundation of Sur dynasty and introduced many reforms in the society. After his death, confusion and disorder appeared all over the kingdom because of the incapability of his son. As a result, Tājkhān ascended the throne and laid the foundation of Karbani dynasty. He was succeeded by his brother Sulēmān. Sulēmān's empire included Orissa in the South-East and the Brahmaputra in the North-East. But his son Daūd Khān spent time enjoying the pleasure of life. As a result, he could not hold on his rule for long and at last in 1574 A.D., the great Mughals appeared in Bengal with a view to establishing their own rule here.

According to some historians, the relation between Delhi and Bengal was strengthened during this period. Because of this cultural exchange began between Delhi and Bengal. They also said that the Mughals' conquest opened for Bengal a new era of peace and progress. But it is doubtful whether the statement is correct. It cannot be ignore that during the period of Pathans, the Bengalee followers of Caitanya came forward to establish the Vaiṣṇava mathas all over Nālakāśṭha, Mathura and Vṛndavana. The best Tāntrics also appeared in Bengal during the reign of the Pathans.

The life-time of Caitanyadeva was from 1486 to 1533 A.D. The world history of that period covered the historical era of critical wars. The western medieval period was at its fag end. The present period started from 1485 A.D. That was the reason for which the western histories termed the modern period from 1485 to 1603 A.D. as the "beginning of the modern age".
Within one year of Caitanya's coming, the foreigners took great interest to enter India through water-ways. When Vasco–Dá–Gáma discovered the way to India, at that time Caitanya was only twelve-years old. The condition of Bahamani kingdom was the worst then. The period was full of killings, lootings and ugly scenes of tortures. At Marwar also, there was a chaotic condition. The communication system between Orissa and Bengal was also very difficult. The Muslims closed the roads by placing trident (trisūls). But before the advent of Caitanyadeva, this communication system between Bengal and the rest of India had been restored.

The word "Bāṅglādeś" meant West Bengal. In Čūrāmaṇi Dāsa's work, it is stated that after the death of Caitanya's father, he went to see his father's place,

"Śacī kahe Bāṅge putra karaha gaman"  
(Śacī told her son to go to West Bengal)

In "Caitanya-caritāmṛta" also, we find that Caitanya went to Bāṅglādeś'. Srihatta was the original home of Caitanya's fore-fathers (It was afterwards included in the province of Assam). Upto Sylet, it was named as "Bāṅga". After Caitanyadeva, the words Bāṅgāla was used. The travellers Gastaldi (1560) and Hondvis (1613) also used the word 'Bāṅgāla'. At that time,

69 Sundarananda Vidyavinod "Caitanyadeva", P. 6
70 "Gaurāṅga-Vijaya", PP. 98 - 99
71 Adilīlā, P. 80
72 Nihar Ranjan Gupta, "Bāṅgālīr Itihās", Vol I, P. 140
the administration of the country was under the central govt. Every province of India was put under a Subādār. He was the 'Nawāb' of the province. People had to pay tax which was collected by the finance minister. Some Zaminders were also appointed from the Hindus of high position.

Economic condition: During the period of the powerful emperors, the economic condition was not very bad. Almost all the Nawābs prepared their coins in their own names. The silver coins were called "taṅkā". From "taṅkā", the word "Tākā" has been adopted. "Cowrie" (a shell used as money) was also used in transactions,

In 'Cātanya-bhāgavata' we find,

'Bastra laiyā para tumī param sontoṣe
Pāche tumī karī more diyo samābese'73

(Now you take this cloth and wear it with great satisfaction. After that you pay me with a cowrie).

At that time people used to do the following,

"Dhan naṣṭa kare keha putra kaṅyār bivāy"74

(Some spent money in the marriage of their sons and daughters).

"Puttali karaye keha diyā bahu dhan"75

(Some spent money in the marriage of dolls.)

Yet, they passed their days with fears of dacoits,

73 Adikhanda, P. 61
74 Ibid., P. 8
75 Ibid,
"Āsīyā beṛilā Nityānanda jei sthāne"76
(Once Nityānanda was attacked by a dacoit.)
Rice, oil, cloth etc. were cheap, yet people sometimes suffered from natural calamities. From Jayānanda's kāvyā, we know that,

"Srīhatta dese anācār durvikṣa janmila
Dākā curi anabrāṭi maṛak lāgila"77
(Once Srīhatta was haunted by famine and epidemic)
The trade and commerce of the country also flourished and a large amount of the profit had to be sent to Delhi. Even the subādars also used to take a large amount of money while they were going to Delhi.

People of various castes are mentioned in the caritas. In "Caitanya-bhāgavata", we find "Baṇik" (a trader or merchant), 'Taṅti (a weaver)78 'Gaṇḍha Baṇik'79 (seller of drugs) 'Gop' (a milk man) etc. Their living mainly depended on the traditional professions of their respective castes.

Social condition: In the medieval society of Bengal, we observe that the Brahmins were the leaders of the Hindu society. Some of them formed a conservative group to save Hinduism from its imminent downfall. The Sena-kings in Bengal laid the foundation of Kulinism (a rigid form of Brahminal order). Sometimes

76 Ibid., Seskhanda, P. 349
77 "Caitanya-maṅgala", Nadia khaṇḍa, P. 10
78 Adikhanda, P. 61
79 Ibid,
Hussain Shāh used to oppose the Hindus. Perhaps observing the unity among the Brahmins and the high caste at Navadvip, he adopted this policy. Thus the Hindus of Navadvip had to face some sort of tortures. In Vrindavanadāsa’s kāvya, we find such facts,

"Je Hussain Shāh sarba Oriyār deśe
Deva mūrti bhāṅgilek deul bišeše"\textsuperscript{80}

(That Hussain Shāh destroyed all the idols of Orissa). These were the daily duties of the kings of those days. But this Hindu-hating Hussain Shāh too took a liberal view on Caitanya.

"Heno yavaneo mānilek Gauracandra"\textsuperscript{81}

(That yavana-king also honoured Gaurāṅga).

Hussain Shāh was never fostered antagonistic attitude towards Caitanyadeva. He told the following about Caitanya to Keśāv Bhārati,

"Jekhāne tāhān icchā thākun sekhāne
Āpanār sāstramata karun bidhāne."\textsuperscript{82}

(He may prescribe the religious norms according to his own sweet will staying whereever he likes).

Before the advent of Caitanyadeva, we observe three stages of infightings between the Hindus and the Muslims. At the first stage, they were surprised to see the 'Darbes'.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., Śeṣ khaṇḍa, P. 318
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.,
saints. In the second stage, the Hindus felt the discrimination in language and behaviour with the Muslim administrators, and afraid of as such they were in touch with the Muslims. In the third stage, the remaining Turkish conquerors without entering into their jurisdiction, particularly accepted their views and made them partners in administration.

VṛndāvanaDāsa further narrated how, before the advent of Caitanya, the religious duties and observances of the Hindus were obstructed. Then the people of Navadvīpā were busy in-

"Dharmakarma lok sobe aṣṭi mātra jaśe
Mangalcaṇḍī git kare ḫāgarāṇe
Dambhā kari Bīṣahari puje kon jon"  

(In the name of religion, people used to sing the songs of goddess Mangalcaṇḍī and performed rituals of Manasādevī etc.). Then, "Kṛṣṇanāmabhakti sūrya sakal saṁsār" (chanting of Kṛṣṇanāma was not practised in the society). In Hussain Shāh's administration, the Vaiṣṇavas were afraid of thinking when the Muslim rulers become furious upon the religions celebration of the Hindus, the rulers might cause harm to Navadvipa, only Caitanyadeva himself encouraged the devotees to proceed in their activities without any fear for Muslim ruler's wrath.

The Kājis were the then judges. Even the Sultan was not treated differently by the Kāji. Once Caitanyadeva broke the rule

83 Prasanta Kr. Dasgupta, op., cit., P. 58
84 "Caitanya-bhāgavata", Ādikhaṇḍa, P. 8
of Kājī by singing songs (kirtana) from door to door. At this the Kājī became furious and did as stated below:

"Jāhāre pāila Kājī mārila tāhāre
Bhāṅgila mṛdaṅga anācār kaila dvāre" 85

(The Kājī broke the drum-set, beat the people and started improper conduct.)

After this incident, Caitanyadeva moved around the village and advised the people to perform kirtana. The Kājī, being afraid of this, pleased him with sweet words. Further he took an oath in the name of his future generation that he would not create any obstruction in the performance of kirtana. The agitation of Caitanya against the Kājī meant the first agitation from the subjects against the royal injustice.

From the description of a Portuguese traveler named Barboza who travelled over India in 1514 A.D., we get the information that to get favour from the Muslim Sultan at Gaur, lots of Hindus were converted into Islam. Either willingly or unwillingly, with the cooperation of the Sultanas, Rūpa-Sanātana also adopted the Muslim culture. The other biographies also extended lots of evidences about the tortures on the Hindus by the Muslims. When this oppression was at its zenith, Caitanya’s advent brought a change. Suddenly the bitterness of it substantially reduced. As an incarnation of God, he added an

85 Ibid., Madhyakhanda, P. 240
unique enthusiasm to the Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins and Chandāls.

A debased form of Buddhism, Nāthism, Tantricism was prevalent in the society. This was not only the picture of Navadvip but right from the end of the 15th century upto the first part of the 16th century, the social picture of the entire Bengal, in Caitanya's time brought a new light to almost all the people of this society. Even a good number of Muslims became devotees of Caitanya. One of them was Yavan Haridās.

Common people had no relation with the administration. There was a political bickering between the Hindus and the Muslims, and that too was in serious type.

During that period, the employees were employed in different posts. In the interior of the house, there were eunuch (khojā) watchman. The departmental heads were entitled as Khān, Mallik etc. In Caitanya's time, we also get the existence of two titles - Dabir Khān and Sākar Mallik. Rūpa and Sanātana were placed in these two posts respectively.

The system of taking bride started from that era. When Sanātana Goswāmī was arrested, he by playing rupees seven thousand to the superintendent of the jail, came out of it. 86

86 Prasanta Kr. Dasgupta, op. cit., P. 34
The Mugal officers did not fully trust the Hindu employees. Not a single Bengalee Hindu was placed in a high post.

Rigidity of the caste system went too far and took the colour of oppression. Caste-superstition and untouchability were two ritual forces which led the higher class Hindus to keep the lower class Hindus in a down-trodden condition in the society. The kulins took marriage as a profession. They also made the lives of the medieval Hindu women miserable. In Bhārat Candra's "Annadāmāngal". We see,

"Jekhāne kulīn jāti sekhāne kondol"87
(Where there are the kulins, there are quarrels).
Even in the 20th century, in Sarat Chatterji's novel (Bāmuṇer Meye) we observe the same position of the Bengalee women.

From Gupta era, we observe the existence of the Kayasthas. The Vaidyas were also found in the occupation of Āurvedic treatment. Murāri Gupta was one of them. In "Caitanyabhaṅgavata" it is stated -

"Prabhu kahe Vaidya tumi ihā kene para
Latāpāṭā diyā giyā rogl kara daṭha"88
(Prabhu said, "What is the use of reading the religious books? You are a physician, so treat the patient with plants and creepers").

87 P. 242
88 Ādikhaṇḍa, P. 51
In 'Gaurāṅga-vijaya' we find that Mukunda Dāsa says -

"Rājavaidya Nārāyaṇādāsāmor bāp"  
(Nārāyaṇādāsa, the physician of the king, is my father)

The medieval people were busy in sexual pleasures. They use to go to the prostitution and took wine, meat etc.

"Madya mānsa lolup Brāhmaṇ sab jato"  
(The greedy Brahmins those are addicted to wine and meat etc)

In birth, worship, marriage and funeral ceremonies also people used to follow the instruction of the smṛtis. After Caitanya's birth,

"Chay māse annapraśan karaila  
Nemāi baliā sabe dākite lāgila"  
(When he was six-months old, the annapraśana (the first feeding of rice) was performed and he was called Nemāi by everybody.)

Caitanyadeva, after the death of his father,

"Pitṛkriyā bidhi dṛṣṭye Isvār karilā"  
(Performed the funeral rites of his father)

The marriage was settled with the help of a ghatak (match-maker).

In Jayānanda's kāvya's, Nemāi requested Ācārya Purandar to be a match-maker of his (second) marriage. Vanamālī was the match-maker of his first marriage.

89 P. 86  
90 Jayānanda, "Caitanya-māṅgala", Ādikhaṇḍa, P. 7  
91 Ibid., Nadiākhaṇḍa, P. 18  
92 Krṣṇadāsa Kavirāj, "Caitanya-Śaritāmṛta", Ādilīlā, P. 79.  
93 Nadiā Khaṇḍa, P. 57  
94 Krṣṇadāsa Kavirāj, op. cit., Ādilīlā, P. 79
The biographies also help us know about different types of food. Rice from 'Salidhan' is also mentioned in Kṛṣṇadāsa's kāvyā when Caitanya took his meal in the house of Advaita prabhu after taking samnyāsa. The curry of banana-flower, the fried neem leaves, milk, palm candy etc. were favourite food of Caitanyadeva. Sugar-cane and raw-sugar are also mentioned. People used banana-leaves for offering or putting food in social function. These leaves served the purposes of dishes in dining rooms.

In the 19th century, when the revolution started covering the widow-marriage in the Hindu society, then Surendranath Banerjee helped us recollect that Caitanya relieved the womenfalk from the torture meant for widows. VṛndāvanaDāsa's mother was a teen-aged widow. She was very favourite of Caitanya. As such it is doubtless that she was remarried without his consent. Caitanya also made the man free from the slavery and the traditional rules in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Thus the medieval biographies perfectly and aptly expatiated the contemporary social environments. But what we get in VṛndāvanaDāsa's kāvyā, is never found in any ancient Bengali literature. Kṛṣṇadāsa's kāvyā is also very valuable. But he had no direct relation with the then society because he wrote his kāvyā in Vṛndavana. It is now proved that when the position of the society from all aspects was horrible, Caitanya attracted the

95 Ibid., P. 124
96 Nirmal Narayan Gupta - "Bharatiya Sāhitye Śrī Caitanya", P. 336
people of Bengal with his prema-dharma and created a society for the common people. The movement against the untouchability of the later age started from Caitanya, because he extended a new light to all the people of this society. Thus the medieval biographical literature of Caitanyadeva bore lots of social information of Bengal.

Education and learning: In those days, Navadivpa, the birth-place of Caitanya was at first a very famous seat of Brahminical learning. People from far and wide gathered there to learn the Navya-Nyāya or New-logic, Smṛti and other branches of learning. Among them, the New-logic held the most prominent position in the scheme of learning. Vāsudeva Sānvabhauma at first introduced this subject in Bengal.

A comparative study:

To compare the religious condition of the two states, we observe that the worship of Viṣṇu was prevalent but along with this the Śākta-Tantric elements, the Sahajiyā, Nāthism and the worship of various gods and goddesses had a tremendous influence on the religious life of the people in both the provinces. The teachings of the left-handed Tantric schools of both Hindu and the Buddhist types were also very popular. The female deities - Manasā, Cāṇḍī and Sītalā were the semi-Śākta deities whose worship was also very popular.

As regards the political condition, Assam was somewhat different from Bengal because Assam was never under the Muslim
A number of petty chiefs belonging to Hindus and hill-tribes were ruling over the different parts of Assam. But in Bengal, the repression of the Muslim rulers terrified the caste Hindus. In order to avoid oppression, some lower sections of the Hindus embraced Islam. Many of the high-caste Hindus also embraced Islam and adopted Muslim habits and customs.

As regards the economic condition, most of the people of Assam were agriculturists, other resources and valuable trade commodities were also procured in Assam. In Bengal also, the economic condition was good. The trade and commerce also flourished well.

As regards the society, various hill-tribes and the plain people who hailed from Aryan and other stocks formed the bulk of society in Assam. The members of Assam maintained their individual customs and manners. But the society of Bengal was not so much of complex because such various tribes were not found in Bengal. Though the people of Bengal were influenced by Islamic manners and customs, yet some at least formed a conservative group to save Hinduism.

As regards education and learning the literary contributions were far reaching in both the lands. The people of Assam got encouragement from the royal patronage. Here also the philosophical systems, jñāna, astrology, medicine were keenly studied. Navadvipa of Bengal was the main centre of education and
learning. But the main bulk of the people were deprived of the light of learning and in this regard the condition of Assam was no better than that of Bengal. In Bengal, scholars cared very little for devotional matters.