CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

An attempt to survey the medieval biographies in Assamese and Bengali having thus been made. Conclusions would be drawn about their nature, situation, quality and value with the help of various findings.

In the medieval biographies of Assam and Bengal, it may be observed that the entire biographical literature started centering the two great saints - Sāṅkaradeva and Caitanyadeva. Sāṅkaradeva overwhelmed the heart of the people of Assam and Caitanyadeva influenced the people of Bengal. These two great Vaiṣṇava saints initiated a new and enlightened society through their preachings. In the devotional field also, researches should take sincere attempt to analyse their individual talents and characteristics. So, before drawing a final conclusion, it is necessary to discuss in brief, their individual idealisms and principles.

A Comparative Study

The question of Sāṅkaradeva's acquaintance with Caitanyadeva is still in the dark. According to several biographers, Sāṅkaradeva had been to Puri when Caitanyadeva was enjoying the last phase of his life and there Sāṅkaradeva had meeting with Caitanyadeva. Some biographers also assert that this meeting took place at Nadia. But reliable proofs are lacking.
But it is true that both of them appeared at the same time, and Vaiṣṇavism secured a strong foothold in Assam and Bengal with their help. At that time the Sāktas used to practice other various esoteric rites which had no abiding spiritual and aesthetic influence on the religion of the Hindus. At that critical position, both of them preached universal brotherhood of mankind and faith in Hari.

As there were similarities between the two, so were there points of differences also. Śaṅkaradeva was a thoughtful reformer whereas Caitanya was a saint. Śaṅkaradeva had to conflict with the karmakanḍi Brahmins all through his life but Caitanyadeva faced the troubles with Sākta Brahmins and Kāzi for a few years. A large section of Brahmins of Assam always stood in the way of Śaṅkaradeva but Caitanyadeva being a Brahmin was respected by a large section of Brahmins.

Śaṅkaradeva in every sense came out victorious first for his scholarly and reasonable arguments, then for his devotion. But Caitanyadeva conquered the hearts of the people first, by his devotion, then by his argumentation. Śaṅkaradeva's superiority as a creator was unparalled. But sentimental Caitanyadeva had no zeal for studies. Both of them also differ in respect of the relationship between God and the devotee. Both of them epitomised their cults in different numbers of holy names of God.
1. Śaṅkara by four names.
   Caitanya by sixteen names.

2. Śaṅkara's process of initiation is 'śaraṇa'.
   Caitanya's process of initiation is 'dīkṣā'.

3. Śaṅkara's process of chanting name is 'kīrtana'.
   Caitanya's process of chanting name 'śaṅkīrtana'.

4. Śaṅkara's premises for prayer is called 'satra-nāṃghar'.
   Caitanya's premises is called 'maṭha'.

5. Śaṅkara's relationship between God and devotee is 'dāsya'.
   Caitanya's relationship between God and devotee is 'madhura'.

6. Śaṅkara upheld the theory of 'advaitavāda'.
   Caitanya upheld the theory of 'dvaitavāda'.

7. Śaṅkara's ideal devotee is 'Uḍḍhava'.
   Caitanya's ideal devotee is 'Rādhā'.

8. According to Śaṅkara, the admission of women were strictly prohibited.
   But in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, women were placed highly. Caitanya advocated for worshipping of the women.

9. Śaṅkara used to worship Viṣṇu only.
   Caitanya was the worshipper of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

   There is no similarity between the 'Bargīts' of Śaṅkara with that of Vaiṣṇava songs. Thus it appears that there
   was no influence of Caitanya over Śaṅkara. Though both of them had to face many troubles in translating their ideals,
   yet the problems of Assam were exactly not identical with the problems
of Bengal. But it is true that the emotional Bhakti-doctrine is the main stream of the Vaiṣṇavite theology and philosophy imbibed from the extremely devotional fervour discernible in the personality of Saṅkaradeva and Caitanyadeva.

The biographical literature took its shape in the hands of Plutarch in the 1st century A.D. After that many attempts were made in writing biographies in India. But the Indians were highly religious minded and spiritual by nature and they attached importance to the life in this world. So, in early days Sanskrit literature also, biography was not recognised as a branch of literature and that is why Buddha carita and Harṣacarita also bear only few characteristics of biography. But in Pāli and Prākṛt, some biographical works were written like Western hagiographies though they are also full of supernatural events.

In the medieval biographies of Assam and Bengal, when the life-stories of the Vaiṣṇavite saints were narrated in prose and verse, we observe a high amount of adoration for the subject. All the biographies of this age being on religious preachers, the great amount of praise and the sense of worship for the subjects are quite natural. Most of the works were written by their disciples and these disciples do generally have unflaPPing admiration and respect for their gurus. They wrote with a religious fervour. The writing biographies at that time was nothing but practising religion and spreading it.
However the values of these biographies or the hagiographies of this period cannot be ignored.

To compare the two movements, the followers of Śaṅkaradeva and Caitanyadeva took up the responsibility of carrying the task of their respective leaders. Mādhavadeva, Dāmodaradeva etc. in Assam and Nityānanda, Advaita etc. in Bengal gave the movements a solid base with their life-long devotion and sacrifice. In Assam, the movement remained mainly confined to the state itself and in some neighbouring areas, whereas in Bengal, it converted a large part of India because Caitanyadeva himself made a net work in Bengal. His chief agents helped greatly in giving an all-India shape to the movement. The Tāntric Buddhists strongly opposed to the movement sponsored by Vamsīgopāladeva, whereas in Bengal, the Buddhists had no place in the society. Yet Viṣṇu in the form of Vāsudeva began to be worshipped both in Assam and Bengal.

To compare the political aspects, some sort of differences between Assam and Bengal are observed. Assam was not politically subject to the followers of an Islamic creed. Whereas in Bengal, the Hindus were terrified by the repression of the Muslim rulers. From social conditions we find some sort of similarities in respect of their livelihood and social customs and manners.
But regarding marriage, we observe that unlike Bengal, the bridegroom of Assam had to pay a little amount of money to the bride's guardian, whereas in Bengal, the family of the bride had to pay a handsome amount of dowry. Otherwise the bride had to face some sort of tortures. But comparatively the society of Assam was much of complex because in this vast land, people had no uniformity in religion and language. In both the lands, the Śāktā-Tāntric creed had a tremendous influence on the religious life of the people. As regards the intellect, the condition of Assam and Bengal was almost the same. The great bulk of population had no light of education. They remained illiterate.

But one thing we have observed that the tendency of writing the biographies inspired the people of medieval period. The main purpose of their writing the biographies was the glorification of their gurus and the propagation of the religious doctrines. These biographies were written in the satras of Assam. Till now, many biographies or carita puthis are lying unpublished in the satras and in the maṭhas and ākhṛṇs of Bengal. These satras of Assam played a great role in the propagation of the biographies among the masses and their contributions are much more than that of the ākhṛṇs and maṭhas because the ākhṛṇs and maṭhas have very limited activities and influence.

From literary point of view, it is observed that in both the lands, the literary contributions are worth mentioning. In
Assam Śaṅkaradeva himself and his followers created a new branch of literature by writing kāvyas, biographies etc. On the other side, the followers of Caitanyadeva also produced their works on Vaisnava philosophy and biography in both Sanskrit and Bengali. Both the group of followers born with literary genius and so the values of their writings cannot be ignored. Inspite of the supernatural elements, researchers may find in those works the detailed accounts of the lives of the religious saints and devotees of those days. Sometimes the narration become quite poetic and artistic. Their works have been storehouses of a wealth of information about those days in religious, political, social, economical and cultural affairs. So, though these works cannot be termed as biographies in the proper sense, yet their literary values cannot be ignored. The scope of these works has not been confined only within the rigid walls of religions but their effects are far reaching in moulding the conduct and character of people in general. For the first time, the writers devoted themselves to the glorification of men like Gods. These have been good source materials not for the future biographies but also for medieval Assam and Bengal as a whole. They are important both from the historical and biographical point of view. Historical because they throw light upon the circumstances in which the Śaṅkara and Caitanya movements grew. Biographical in the sense that the lives and activities of the great leaders have been brought out in details.