PREFACE

I must confess that I had a special fascination for the study of the biographical works of the Vaisnava saints of North East India since my student life and so, I take up this subject as doctoral research. The study is based on the medieval biographical works in Assamese and Bengali. For this I have gone through the various biographies of Assam and Bengal published till now. The purpose of this work is to trace the emergence of the medieval biographies, the then political, social, religious and economic conditions and the literary traditions of both Assam and Bengal. A peep into the historical background was felt desirable so as to emphasize that social atmosphere prior to the advent of Śrī Śaṅkaradeva of Assam and Śrī Caitanyadeva of Bengal as well as the flow of Vaisnavism in Assam and Bengal.

Among the Vaisnava saints in the medieval ages, the foremost were Rāmānanda, Kaviṛ, Nāmadeva, Dādu, Nānak, Vallabhācarya, Caitanyadeva and Śaṅkaradeva. Among all these great leaders, Śaṅkaradeva of Assam and Caitanyadeva of Bengal propagated the cult of Vaisnavism. The Neo-Vaisnava movement ushered in by Śaṅkaradeva created an unprecedented zeal for the culture of biographical literature. In Bengal, Caitanya's image also came to be as an image of God. As a result, the incidents in his life were magnified and given a shape so as to establish him as being of divine nature. Both of them have drawn our special
attention not only because they were great saints, but also for their teachings, which had a tremendous impact on the then socio-cultural and religious spheres.

Śāṅkara-deva built his system upon the ethics of the Gītā and the Bhāgavata. He adopted a unique democratic method by establishing 'śatra and namghar throughout Assam and Cooch-Bihar in North Bengal. Through his Bhakti-cult, people realised that there is no caste-distinction. Caitanya-deva also recognised no caste-distinctions when a devotee becomes a Vaisnava or a worshipper of Kṛṣṇa. Such attitude towards worship gave his Bhakti-movement a tremendous appeal.

In the present book, I have tried to elaborate a comparative account of medieval Vaisnavism giving emphasis on different aspects depicted in the biographies. So the life-histories of the saints, the satra-institutions and other socio-political conditions have also come-up the proposed discussion. Besides that an attempt has also been made to discuss about the values of all those biographies found in Assamese and Bengali languages. In short this work is solely depended on the published biographies of the Vaisnava saints properly edited by experts.

Madhuchhanda Roy Choudhury
(Madhuchhanda Roy Choudhury)