CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Object of the thesis: The Object of the present thesis is to attempt a detailed study of the biographical literature in Assamese and Bengali of the medieval period. It is true that a few well-reputed scholars and critics wrote some valuable articles, prefaces and notes on the Assamese and Bengali caritas, i.e., Vaiśṇavite biographies. But no serious study has been made on the comparative study of the medieval biographical literature of Assam and Bengal. But this is very important to know about the Neo-Vaiśṇavite movement of Assam and its impact in the society of Assam and Bengal. Only because of that, this comparative study of Assamese and Bengali caritas has been proposed. This work - 'a comprehensive work on the origin and development of Assamese and Bengali biographies' is giving stress on the purpose of the biographers, the then political and social conditions of this region and also their literary values.

Scope of the thesis: A good number of scholars have done some research works in the field of Bengali literature from the beginning of the current century. Similarly a few scholars have also done some researches on Assamese biography during this period of time. But the proposed topic has not been traversed by any of the scholars. There are sufficient scope for such a comparative study of the 'Medieval Biographical Literature in Assamese and Bengali.' Moreover, it is hoped that this type of study will give enough scope to learn the Vaiśṇavite movement of
Eastern India and the contributions of the Vaiśnava saints of this part of the country.

There are lots of biographies in Assamese and Bengali in the form of old traditional manuscripts preserved in a few reputed libraries of Assam and Bengal including some satras of Assam. In this survey, an attempt has been made to cover all Assamese and Bengali biographies. Of course there are many limitations for which other study may not give an unique information, but the researcher has tried her best to make it a fruitful study.

Period under review: The thesis will cover the medieval period of both the group of literature. During the period from the 15th century to the 18th century, most of the biographies were written centering Śaṅkaradeva of Assam and Caitanyadeva of Bengal - the two renowned Vaiśnavaite saints of that period. So the biographical literature during the period from the 15th to the 18 century (later medieval period) are expected to include in this study.

Utility of studying the early biographies: We will surely find the historical, social and economical conditions of the period concerned. Moreover, educational system, ethical value of the institution etc. depicted in literature, will be discussed. By studying these biographies, it will be possible to find out the motive of those works. Comparative study of both the groups will be made and we also find the value of each class of biographies. These biographies were produced for popularising
the heroes of each biography. The language was comparatively easier and simpler to a great extent.

The present thesis writer, while preparing the scheme for writing the thesis had to consult quite a good number of histories of literature of Assamese and Bengali, out of which the most prominent are Satyendranath Sarma's 'Assamīyā Sāhityar Samikṣātmak Itibṛtta', Sukumar Sen's 'Bāṅgālā Sāhityer Itiḥās' (Vol-I and II), Asit Kumar Bandyāpadhyay's 'Bāṅgālā Sāhityer Itibṛtta' (Vol-II) etc. Besides that most of the available caritas in Assamese and Bengali of the medieval age were also consulted by the scholar and all these books are mentioned in the Bibliography properly.

Biography: Before tracing the origin of biography, it will be better to know what biography is. Biography literally means writing about life, 'bios' in Greek meaning 'life' and 'graphos' meaning 'to write'. It is composed as a work of art for which it is a part of literature. In English literature, this word 'biography' was first used in 1683 A.D.¹ According to Paul Murray Kendall, biography is the simulation of a man's life in words². Thus it differs from other literary works.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines biography as the person's life history written by another or branch of literature. This definition insists on three essential elements -

1 Gobinda Prasad Sarma, "Jīvan āru Assamīyā Jīvan" - P.1
2 Paul Murray Kendall, "The Art of Biography," P.15
3 "Oxford English Dictionary," P. 180
history, individual and literature. According to John A. Garraty, biography means 'the record of life'. In the opinion of Nicolson, it must be a truthful and correct record of an individual and that must be composed as a work of art. Encyclopaedia of Britannica states that biography includes all these works in which a writer seeks to recreate the life either of himself or of another, utilizing all the available resources of memory and research.

From the above definitions, one can easily have a clear idea of biography. It is an artistic reconstruction of the events of life of a particular person and the events must be a skillful imitation of the events of a real life. Moreover, a biographer should not neglect the influence of the time and society on the life of the person along with his or her personality and character. It, therefore, does not include narratives which are unhistorical and do not deal primarily with individuals. Besides, they are not composed with a conscious artistic purpose. It was Dr. Johnson who for the first time discussed about the art and importance of biography.

5 Harold Nicolson, "The Development of English Biography," PP.7-8
6 "Encyclopaedia of Britannica," P.28
7 Govinda Prasad Sarma, "Jevani," PP.4-5
8 Samual Johnson, "Rambler, No.60, Saturday, 13th Oct., 1750"
Classification of Biography: Biographies can be classified into three types: (1) Hagiography, (2) Traditional Biography and (3) New Biography.

(1) In Hagiography, along with the life-history, their ideologies have been spread. Their main target was to preach the religion. In this period, we can refer to the 'Dāmodara Carita' by Nilakanṭha Dāsa and Anon 'Kathā-Gurucharita'.

(2) In the Traditional Biography, along with the common men, the hero had been shown as superman. His personal character was painted well. The 'Parallel Lives' of Plutark belongs to this category.

(3) In the New-Biography, biographies were beautified and special attention was given to enrich the biography. Here imagination took the forefront as novel. The 'Ariel' of Andre Maurois belongs to this type. This New-Biography again can be divided into two types: Intuitive-Biography and Psychological Biography.

In New-Biography, personality and character of the person are kept intact and the events and words put in the subjects are invented. Before Lytton Strachey's movement of New Biography, such type of biography existed in Europe and America. Papini's 'Life of Christ' (1921) is an example of this type. By the end of 19th century, science and modern psychology influenced the biographies and such biographies are put under Psychological Biography. The first successful work in this trend is 'the biography of Leonardo De Vinci (1910) by Freud. This new
biography sometimes appears as beautiful as novels. So its another name is Novelized Biography. Andre Maurois's 'Ariel' (1923) is also an example of Novelized Biography. Another characteristic of this New-Biography is that satirical language often used aiming at the subject matter. So, it is also called Debunking Biography. 'Eminent Victorians' of Lytton Strachey is an example of Debunking Biography.

British biographer Harold Nicolson again told us about two types of biographies, one was Pure Biography and the other Impure Biography. The biography, where the role of the hero is not altered, is called Pure-Biography and where the hero's rôle, personality and character is changed, is called Impure Biography.

The biographies of the medieval period of Assam and Bengal to be studied actually fall under the hagiography, a subgroup of biography. This word originates from the Greek word 'hagio' i.e. 'pure', which means 'Saint'. Thus the word hagiography means 'Saint character', i.e. life of Saint. Biography begins with the hagiography as the life history of the Saints and the noble and great men are used for the purpose of ethical teachings. In course of time the commemorative strain in biography mingles with a deductive strain. This is a pregnant source of biography.

9 Harold Nicolson, op.cit., pp 8-11
The main characteristic of biography is along with the history of the mankind. It also tells us a lot - about every individual. In hagiography, it has been seen that all the lives of the saints are almost of the same type. All the biographies written from the 3rd century to the 14th century AD, in Europe, are not pure - biographies because these writings were attributed by supernatural elements and the biographers pointed out the greatness of their heroes. So these biographies of that (middle) period can be termed as hagiographies. In these hagiographies, they gave much stress on spreading the greatness of Christianity.

In hagiography, the centre of interest was never the individual, but always the institution. Their insistence on the ethical message allowed the hagiographers no scope for insight or even accuracy. Their desire to prove their case induced them to insert the legendary, the super-natural and the miraculous.

Source materials used in this thesis: In the present thesis, the knowledge and information are mainly derived from the authentic books on the life and teachings of the two saints of Assam and Bengal (Śaṅkaradeva and Caitanyadeva). The main caritas of Śaṅkaradeva are Daityāri’s 'Mahāpuruṣa Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva āru Mādhavadeva carita', Bhūṣāna’s 'Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva āru Mādhavadeva carita', Bhūṣāna’s 'Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva āru Mādhavadeva carita', Rāmaṇanda’s 'Śrī Guru - carita', Rāmacaraṇas 'Gurucarita', Nīlakaṇṭha Dāsa’s 'Dāmodaradeva carita' Rāmaṇanda’s 'Vamāśigopāladevar carita' etc.
The main caritas of Caitanyadeva are Vṛndāvana Dāsas 'Caitanya bhāgavata', Jayānanda's 'Caitanya-ṛṇagala' Kṛṣṇadēsa's Caitanya Caritāmṛta, Locanaśa'a 'Caitanya-ṛṇagala', Cūrāmani Dēsa's 'Gaurāṅga-Vijoy' etc.

Some valuable informations have also been gathered from Mathura and Puri about Caitanyadeva and other informations from some heads of the satras of Assam about Śaṅkaradeva which have their due share in enriching this work.

Methodology: While discussing the caritas the thesis writer tries to maintain its historical method consecutively. After this, the work has also maintained its comparative method. Śaṅkaradeva and Caitanyadeva, both of them propagated the cult of Vaiśnavism. Their teaching were able to unify a huge section of men. Such is the extent of similarity between the two faiths. So, this tries to give an elaborate and comparative account of the works and teachings of both the saints. The type of Vaiśnavism that existed before their advent and the new form of Vaiśnavism after them, its permanent impression on the social and cultural life are included within this work. Writer also tried her best to use the names of the medieval writers, subjects, caritas and in the lists of the books of both medieval and modern period with diacritical marks.
Through this thesis, an effort has been made to show how our Vaiṣṇava preachers tried for the re-union of the society. They have drawn our special attention not only because they are great saints, but also for the fact that their teachings had a tremendous impact on the then social, political and religious spheres, and they tried to reap the seed of honesty and morality among the common people. The main purpose of this comparative study is to help the society for re-organisation.

In this thesis, an attempt has been made to fulfil this goal.