INTRODUCTION

Biography is by no means an insignificant branch of Assamese literature. It is not small in size, too. But in spite of its considerable importance and size, this branch of Assamese literature is somehow escaping the serious notice of most of the critics of this literature. It is true, important scholars and critics of the first half of this century like Banikanta Kakati and Birinchi Kumar Barua wrote valuable articles, prefaces and notes on the Assamese Caritas or Vaishnavite hagiographies. But they were neither concerned with the literary values proper of these biographies or with the values of these works as biography per se. And these two were our most prominent critics of literature till the middle of the present century. Likewise, after the sixties, the critics like Hiren Gohain and Bhaben Barua, who have by now won the highest place of prominence as critics, have never bothered themselves with any biographical work for the purpose of evaluation as literature. Gohain has gone occasionally to the Vaishnavite hagiographies or to some modern biographical works. But this is only to draw sociological or historical materials from these works for the studies of his own interest. Biography as a branch of literature, is being neglected in this way by most of our major critics and scholars.

But one happy sign even in such a situation of criticism of biography in Assamese has been that, in spite of such indifference to biography of those of our major critics, we have at least two other prominent scholars and critics,
belonging to the generation immediately after that of Kakati and Barua, who have turned their attention to this branch of literature. Their attention is by no means undivided; their critical writings on biography are by no means large in volume. But their studies are still significant, though limited, sparse and casual; because they made our readers aware of biography as a branch of literature that should invite our attention. These two scholar-critics are, Maheswar Neog and Satyendranath Sarma. Maheswar Neog in the thirties added a note to a biographical essay he wrote,1 on the tradition of the New Biography. This note, though very small, was the first discussion in Assamese of the New Biography. Likewise, Satyendranath Sarma, in the early sixties wrote an essay on the Assamese caritas2 which became our first critical observation of the Vaisnavite hagiographies as biography - a branch of literature.

After Neog and Sarma, there appeared for a while, another generation of writers and critics in the Post-War Period. They, too, were totally indifferent to this branch of literature. Hiren Gohain and Bhaben Barua belonged to the still next generation of critics; and their lack of concern


After Gohain and Barua, however, we have had another writer, Gebinda Prasad Sarma, who has turned his attention, not still undivided though, to this branch of literature. Indeed, he has been our first biography critic who has discussed methodically, not only the nature, art and history of biography in a book, but has also classified Assamese biographical works in a critical survey of Assamese biography in one article. He has also discussed the problems and limitations of Assamese biography in still another article.

But even Sarma's attention to biography in general, and Assamese biography in particular, has not done full justice to Assamese biography. While his discussion on the theory and history of biography in general, has been a moderately adequate study, and the only discussion of its kind in Assamese so far, his critical survey of Assamese biography cannot be regarded as complete and comprehensive. It is because of this gap in the critical discussion of Assamese biography that, I have undertaken this work - a comprehensive work on the origin and development of Assamese biography.

3. Gebinda Prasad Sarma, Jivani (Biography), (Gauhati, Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1974)


The first chapter of this work on the nature, art and history of biography in general, cannot claim any originality. There is, first of all, that complete book on it, in Assamese by Gebinda Prasad Sarma, referred to already. Over and above this, there have been such fine critics and scholars of biography in the West like Harold Nicolson, John A. Garraty, and Paul Murray Kendall. But the other chapters of mine where I propose to dwell on the origin and development of Assamese biography while offering a critical survey of them in classified, chronological order, would perhaps be able to claim some credit, if not originality proper. The critical survey I am going to make, is designed to show the development of Assamese biography from its beginning till 1975. It would be done against the background of history. This should fill up the gap in the study of our Assamese biography as a branch of literature.

In this survey, I would try my best to cover all the Assamese biographies. However, if the qualities of some works are such that they do not deserve any critical attention, they would only be mentioned either in the work or in the bibliography. I cannot, however, say that my coverage of all the biographies in this way would be perfect. The literary situation in Assam is such that most of the books do not get reviewed or even advertised. And once a book goes out of print, it goes out of print for ever. Besides, all the books in print nowhere get preserved properly. In such circumstances, I cannot say that, I would be able to cover all biographies in print without any failure. I can only say that best efforts
I am not going to include in my work the Biographical Novels, though I would include the Novelised Biographies. Biographical Novels are novels, though based on real lives. The novelist has full freedom there to present a real life just as he sees it, with the help of as much imagination as he thinks necessary. Biographical Novels thus remain out of my scope. It is for this that the Assamese Biographical Novels, *Rup Tirthar Yetri* (The Pilgrim of Beauty, 1963), a novel on the life of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, *Bodhukabher* (Two place names, 1976), a novel on the life of Mādhava Deva by Medini Chaudhury, and *Porengadāo* (A bird's name, 1982), a novel on the life of Bishnu Rava, also by Medini Chaudhury, would not come to the pages of this work. Novelised Biographies, on the other hand, are biographies, though they resemble a novel in form and style. And thus they would come to the purview of the thesis.

Let me come now to the method to be followed here. I am going first to define biography; and then to the questions of its nature, art and history. All this would be about biography in general, brought here to judge our Assamese biographies against this general theory.

In the second chapter, I would go to the origin of biography in Assamese. I have chosen to use the word 'beginning' in plural number in the title of this chapter; because it is found that Assamese biography has actually two beginnings. With the caritas of the Vaishnava Age, no doubt,
our biographical literature began first. But after the establishment of the British rule in the State, the nature of biography changed in such a way that we had, as if, a second beginning here again. In this chapter, I would show the values of the society that went to the making of biographies in the two Ages, British and pre-British.

In the third chapter, I would consider the Assamese biographies of the first period - garitas in verse; and then in the fourth chapter, I would discuss the garitas in prose which were a later development. In my discussion of the garitas in these two chapters, I would apply the critical method of biography as literature - the method applied by Western critics of biography like Harold Nicolson, John A. Garraty and Paul Murray Kendall. My concern here would not be with the hagiological problems of these hagiographies. We have already had sound and systematic hagiologists or editors of old manuscripts like Birinchi Kumar Barua, Maheswar Neog and Satyendranath Sarma. If any MS. of any old hagiography is yet to be discovered or edited for publication after due textual studies, or if any further textual studies are to be made of the hagiographies already edited and published, I have left these tasks to the hagiologists or old manuscript editors of the kind of the above three. My task here has been to look upon the Vaishnava hagiographies as biographies - a branch of literature. I would of course, discuss only published hagiographies, after placing them in their proper chronological order, and after going to their authorship. But for the question of authorship and year of publication,
I would rather depend on the findings of the earlier
biologists or editors. I would not like to go to any MS.
of the Age which has not yet been published. My concern here
would be always with the printed book only.

The fifth chapter of this work would be dealing with
the biographies of the British Period. Whatever change came
to Assamese biography in this Age in its nature and tone
under the British influence, is proposed to be shown here.
Then in the sixth chapter, I propose to discuss the
biographies of the Post-Independence Period. The further
changes that came to the society in this Age, as regards
man’s outlook on men, and the corresponding change, if any,
in the nature and tone of biography of this Age, and the
expansion of the fields of biography in this Age – these would
all be observed here.

In the seventh and last chapter that would conclude
the work, I propose to go to the various qualifications and
limitations of Assamese biography over the Ages, with the
help of a summary of my findings in the critical survey
already made. I would point out the causes behind the bright
and dark spots in this branch of literature. Also, I would
like to show here the directions in which Assamese biography
is expected to grow against the perspectives of its present
nature and development.

I would close my survey of Assamese biography in
1975, this work having been undertaken by me the following
year.
Now, about the problem of transcription in the work. Before the British Age, no Assamese writer had any occasion to use English, or for that matter, the Roman script. After the establishment of the British rule, almost all our writers got English education; and had occasions to write in English, if nothing else, at least their names. This removes one problem from my path. I have had no difficulty in spelling the names of the writers from the British Age onwards. I have tried my best to use the writers' or subjects' own spellings of their names and surnames. Various persons, however, spell their own names and surnames in various ways, even when the words are the same. For example, in case of the name, Prafulla, one writer uses this very spelling; whereas another writer is found to go to the principles of phonetics, and uses the spelling, Prapulla. Then there is the surname Barua. Most writers use this spelling. But there have been writers or subjects of our biographies who spell this word in as many ways as Barooah, Baruah and even Baruva. I would not meddle with the spellings of the names of our writers and subjects from the British Period onwards. I would not like to offend them, whether they are dead or alive, by correcting their spellings.

But though in this way, this problem in the British and Post-British Periods can be solved, there would still remain another problem. In this Modern Age, too, we have had occasions to use certain names of the persons of the Medieval Age, like Śaṅkaradeva, or words first used in that period,
like garita. In the Modern Age (British and Post-British Periods), these medieval persons' names, or these medieval words, have undergone changes in their pronunciation. For example, Sāṅkaradeva is now pronounced as Sāṅkardev, while garita is now pronounced as garit. For the sake of consistency, I would use the same spellings for such names or words, both in the Modern Age and in the Medieval Age. In the Medieval Age, there having been no occasion for our writers to use Roman scripts, in transliterating their names in this script, I would follow the transliteration system of the Indologists.

To be specific, I would follow the E.I.L. Brochure of Sahitya Akademi.

In case of the biographies of the Modern Age (British and Post-British Periods), I would use the general spelling system for the titles of books. But very often, the names of the subjects become the titles of biographies. In this case, the subjects' own spellings of their names would be used, if of course we know how they spelt their names in English.

Though diacritical marks would not be used in case of names of persons of this Age, and also in case of names of places of this Age; in case of names of the persons of the ancient or medieval times, diacritical marks would be used. In case of place-names, diacritical marks would be used only if the place-names do not exist to-day. In case of titles of books, magazines or newspapers, however, diacritical marks would be used if the words there are Indian, and even if such words form the names of persons. In case of Indian words in places
other than titles, diacritical marks and the Indological spelling system would be used, only when there is absolute necessity. In case of Indian words very familiar in Indian English or in case of Indian words of non-Sanskrit origin, the general spelling system would be used without any diacritical mark.