Chapter II

THE BEGINNINGS IN ASSAMESE

The origin of Assamese biography is traced back to the early part of seventeenth century. Before going to discuss the origin and development of Assamese biography, it is better to see whether in the Old Indian and Middle Indian languages, any biographical work was attempted. As in Europe, in India, too, efforts at writing biography were made in Sanskrit and Pali languages, though these did not turn out to be pure and complete biographies. From our discussion in the earlier chapter, it has been clear that the biographical literature took its shape in the hands of Plutarch in the first century A.D. Though during this century, many attempts at writing biography were made in India, too, yet they did not attain the level of Plutarch in this country in that century or soon after. The Indians of the ancient times were by and large spiritual by nature for which they attached little importance to the life in this world. Naturally, Indians did not see much meaning in going to perpetuate the memory of life in this world by taking recourse to biography.

The most important works which can be regarded as some sort of biography in Sanskrit are Asvaghosa's Buddhacarita written in the first century A.D. and Bhāpatṭa's Haracarita of the seventh century. But both these works are incomplete; and in both the works, only the first half of the respective hero's life is narrated. As per traditional divisions of
Sanskrit literature, *Buddha-carita* is a *kavya* while *Harsa-carita* is an *ākhyāyikā*, biography not being recognised as a branch of literature in Sanskrit. Anyway, both the works have some characteristics of biography, as we understand it to-day. From biographical point of view, *Āśvaghoṣa*’s *Buddha-carita* is better in quality than *Bṛhad-bhāṭṭa*’s *Harsa-carita*. According to A. B. Keith,¹ it is a creation of art. *Āśvaghoṣa* has made laudable attempts to put the materials of his subject’s life in an artistic way. Though he could not go beyond the tradition of Sanskrit literature, yet his descriptions are clear and charming. However, the incidents that are introduced in the work as the events of Buddha’s life are not supported by evidences. Fact and fiction perhaps have rubbed their shoulders together in this work, for which it has been difficult to call it a biography proper. Anyway if somebody else later made further effort to write biography in the line of *Āśvaghoṣa*, in Sanskrit literature, too, as in Greek and Roman literature, pure biography would have emerged much earlier. However, six hundred years elapsed after *Āśvaghoṣa*, and only then we had another writer in the same category. This writer is none other than *Bṛhad-bhāṭṭa*. *Bṛhad-bhāṭṭa*’s *Harsa-carita* which is termed ‘*ākhyāyikā*’ or a story in Indian poetics, and may be termed ‘historical romances’ according to Western poetics, bears few characteristics of a modern biography. In the story of the

early life of King Harṣavarṇabha in this book, supernatural and miraculous events preponderate, for which authenticity is lost. The author’s emphasis is more on story-telling in the romantic vein than on presenting the facts of the king’s life in an authentic way.

After Harṣacarita, we do not find any biographical work in Sanskrit literature. But in Pali and Prakrit, some biographical works were written like Western hagiographies or Assamese caritā for the spread of Buddhism and Jainism. Regarding these religious caritā, Satyendranath Sarma states that these life-sketches in Buddhist and Jain literature are full of supernatural and exaggerated events. Saints or religious preachers are shown here as incarnations of God; and in order to do so, supernatural elements or exaggerated events are instilled in them.²

With this background of Indian biographical literature, Assamese biography came into being in the seventeenth century; and these came to be known as Gurucharitā or caritas, meaning biographies of gurus or preceptors.

However, as in other parts of the country, there was the tradition of keeping records of lives or deeds in the form of edicts or inscriptions, in Assam, too, there was the same tradition from a time much earlier than the seventeenth century. To be more precise, we had the inscriptions on rocks.

² Satyendranath Sarma, Sāhityar Āṭhā (Gauhati, Dutta Baruah & Co., 1965), p. 90
and copper plates in Assam from the fifth century onwards. 3

However, these are only scattered materials for biography; and by no stretch of imagination, we can call them biography. They merely show that Assam had a rich tradition of maintaining biographical materials from the fifth century A.D., though nobody made use of it in those distant years to write biography.

From this ancient tradition of keeping record of facts in brief in the inscriptions in Assam, we came to another tradition of the state of keeping records of facts in the form of writings. Coming from the inscriptions to these writings, we find here long narratives of the reigns of various monarchs. These narratives, very often detailed and graphic, of the activities of kings and queens, ministers and diplomats of the Ahom period, began from the thirteenth century A.D. The books that contained such long and detailed records and narratives were called in the Tai-Ahom language, Baraṇji, the English equivalent of which may be, chronicles. This practice of recording the events and activities, anecdotes and episodes of the lives of the monarchs, their royal families, their administration and all that, came from beyond the north-eastern borders of Assam, along with the Ahoms, when they came as

3. A good idea about these inscriptions, and their contents, that could be materials for biography, can be had from such books of Assam epigraphy as Padmanath Bhattacharyya Vidyavinod’s Kāmyūpa Sāsanāvali, (1932), Second edition, ed. Dimbeswar Sarma, Gauhati, Publication Board, Assam, 1982; Pracya Sāsanāvali ed. Maheswar Neog, Gauhati, Publication Board, Assam, 1974; and Inscriptions of Assam ed. Nukunda Madhava Sharma, Gauhati, Gauhati University, 1978
invaders and established their rule in Assam in 1228 A.D.
First the Ahom chroniclers wrote their chronicles or Buranjis
in their own Tai language, most of which are still preserved.
Later, as the Ahoms adopted Hinduism as their religion, and
accepted Assamese as their language, they came to write these
chronicles in Assamese. Thus the tradition of chronicle-
writing in Assamese was formed. It was from this tradition of
chronicle-writing in Assam, that the Vaisnava followers must
have had their idea and inspiration of writing down the lives
and activities of their Vaisnava gurus in the seventeenth
century. This is also pointed out by Sarat Chandra Goswami in
his Preface to Sri Sri Vanamalidevar Carita in the early part
of the present century.

But this can only be one theory of how the idea of
writing down the life-stories of the preceptors was obtained
by their disciples in Assam. And this points only to the
external cause of the emergence of hagiography in Assamese
literature. Maheswar Neog has put forward another theory which
points to the internal cause of the formation of the tradition
of hagiography-writing in Assam. He traces the origin of this
tradition in the Vaisnava cult itself. Neog writes in his
Sankaradeva and His Times:

4. Ramakanta Dvija, Sri Sri Vanamalidevar Carita ed. Sarat
Chandra Goswami (Jorhat, Assam Sahitya Sabha, n.d.),
Preface, p. 1
In his own days Śaṅkara used to celebrate the glory of Lord Rāma and Kṛṣṇa in songs and to narrate their stories according to the wish of his chief disciples. When Mādhavadeva succeeded to Śaṅkara's place in the order, he organised these ceremonies into fourteen sections, each called a prasanga (subject or occasion). He also told the daily congregations tales of the Master. The apostles he sent out to carry the message of bhakti far and wide into the country, followed his example, and some of them particularly excelled in the art of narrating the activities of the Master. So, even in the days of Mādhava, the telling of the story of the guru and listening to it, became a part of the daily religious duty of the sattrā clerics. A living tradition was thus created, and this brought down to us many of the minutest details of lives of Śaṅkara and his apostles. ... ... It was this practice of narration that inspired some of the biographers to compose their work in verse.5

After the death of Śaṅkaradeva, the Vaiṣṇava saints in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries divided themselves along with the split of Vaiṣṇavism into different sects in Assam. As a result, for every sect, more and more sattras were cropping up. And, as Tīrthanath Sarma shows in the context of Auniati Sattra : in the sattras, there is a practice of writing down the lives of successive adhikāras or abbots by any of their

5. Maheswar Neog, Śaṅkaradeva and His Times (Gauhati, Gauhati University, 1965), p. 2
disciples that live with them in the sattra.\(^6\) As a result, each sattra in Assam has in its precincts to-day, a series of biographies of the sattra's successive adhikāras.\(^7\)

In this way, in the Middle Ages of Assamese literature, the garita literature or hagiographical literature became very rich. But as earlier stated, these garitas are not biographies in the proper sense. Every sect tries to show its guru or gurus as superior to the gurus of other sects. And for this, they gave free play to their imagination, using even miracles and supernatural elements, even while using authentic materials of the subjects' lives. For example, in Rāmacarana Thākur's Sāñkara-Garita, the author shows in every step of Śaṅkara-deva's life-story, the resemblance of Kṛṣna of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. However, these garitas are not biographies from our view-point to-day; yet if read perceptively and discriminatively, most of these hagiographies give us the taste of biographies proper.

After all, if the unbelievable stories, miracles and supernatural elements as well as divine qualities attributed to the heroes are ignored, they have in them, with a few exceptions, qualities of good biographies. All these are also the storehouses of facts and true incidents of the subjects' lives and times; and all these are complete records of the lives of the gurus. They are arranged generally in terms of chronology and

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\(^6\) Tirthanath Sarma, Āumiati Sattrak Buroāji (Majuli, Āumiati Sattra, 1975), p. 445

\(^7\) ibid., p. 445
also with a sense of a system. What is more, a few of them also evince a good literary style, whether it is in verse or prose.

After the *carita* school, which continued to the end of the nineteenth century, we see the birth of biography in the modern sense in the British period. As the British established their rule in Assam in 1826, and soon made arrangement for imparting education in their language and system, the Assamese people got imbued in course of time with the Western sense of liberal humanism. In terms of this Western humanism, man is looked upon as man. There is found an intrinsic value in him, and for that matter in his human strength and weakness. In the previous age which saw the *caritas* in place of biographies, our Vaisnava preachers urged men to bow down before all - men, and animals alike - not because they were good or great in themselves, but because the souls of all of them were Rāma or God. Man then had no value, therefore, as man; he had his significance only as a part of God. No wonder, the Vaisnava hagiographers then tried to lay stress on the divine aspect of their subjects following this Indian brand of religious humanism.

In the British Age, when the Assamese people were influenced by the Western concept of humanism, they learnt to

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8. Kukura saṇḍāla gardavaro ātmā Rāma/
    Jāniyā sabāko pari karibā pranāma//

see value in human life of here and now. As such, it was possible in this period to write biographies proper of the men belonging not only to religion, but also to such mundane spheres as social, political, cultural and scientific; and also to the spheres of sports, wrestling and acting.

It is in this way that Assamese biography, as we understand it to-day, emerged ultimately towards the end of the nineteenth century under the impact of Western literature.