CHAPTER I

The Subject matter and the Sources.

1. The Subject and its importance:

Different aspects of society, such as social, historical and cultural of the early period of Assam, then known by the designations of Prāgjyotisa and Kamrajupa, have already been exhaustively dealt with by authorities of the State and outside. But the Assamese Society of the medieval period, the subject matter of our investigation, has almost been left untouched by them. It would not be wrong on our part to say that in spite of the best efforts made by the scholars, owing to paucity of materials, a complete picture of the Assamese Society of the ancient period with its different aspects, still remains incomplete and hazy to us. Besides, the different heterogeneous racial elements in this period could not combine themselves to stand united in order to form a greater society or a nation amongst themselves. The political and the cultural activities of the period also could not infuse a spirit of national unity amongst them. The importance of the study of the subject. "Medieval Assamese Society", therefore, lies in the fact that this is the period in which not only the Assamese Society had got its firm footing on a strong ground, but the entire people stood united as a nation and made an all-round development in different spheres of their national life, making a superb history of their own. Our aim is to see and examine here, how the Assamese Society shaped itself into a complete form in this period and how it marched ahead with different activities of the social life. In the present context of the Subject we will mainly confine ourselves to the discussion of the social, economic and cultural conditions of the period and will try to discuss them in detail as far as possible.
2. Scope of the Subject:

Now, as to the subject itself, "Medieval Assamese Society", what is its scope and what it means? Let us try to explain the jurisdictions of the Medieval period and Assamese Society, one by one.

(a) The Medieval Period:

The whole range of the process of formation and development of the Assamese Society and its culture can be divided into three periods, viz., the ancient, the medieval and the modern. The ancient period covers the period from the earliest time to the 12th century A.D. and the medieval period begins from the beginning of the 13th century A.D., i.e., from the advent of the Ahoms, a Thai-Chinese people, to the beginning of the 19th century A.D., i.e., to the advent of the Britishers to Assam. Accordingly, our predecessors, in their works of the ancient period, covers the range of the time from the earliest time, i.e., from the pre-historic time to the end of the twelfth century A.D. with the exception of K.L. Barua, who, in his work, 'Early history of Kamarupa', covers the period from the earliest time to the 16th century A.D. ¹ We cannot agree with K.L. Barua in regard to this, because, Assam practically entered into a new era and new phase of her political and cultural life from the beginning of the 13th century A.D. along with the entry of the Ahoms, and the ancient designations of the land Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa were replaced by new nomenclature 'Assam'. The term 'Assam' gave birth to other terms like Asam, Ahom etc. Thenceforward the land came to be known as Asam and its people as 'Asamitya'. Towards the end of the ancient period, i.e., in the 10th and the 11th century A.D., the political power of the Kamarupa-kings began to dwindle away and it was almost on the verge of extinction when Jayapala of the Pala dynasty ascended the throne of Kamarupa, whose date of accession was placed at about A.D. 1120.
Dr. P.C. Choudhury aptly remarks: "The political history of the period after Jayapala is as obscure as disconnected, and the unity of the kingdom was lost until the Ahoms, after a long period of contests with their adversaries, restored to a great extent the lost political unity of the kingdom. The Ahoms entered into Assam in the year 1228 A.D. and ruled over this land for a period of about six hundred years, up to the Christian era 1826 A.D., in which year according to the treaty of Yandabu, the land passed into the hands of the Britishers. During the first part of the Medieval period, the Ahoms restored the lost political unity of Kamarupa to a great extent. The new political patrons like the Koches and the Ahoms and the great Socio-religious cum cultural movement, called Vaisnavite movement, working in their own ways have greatly enhanced the progress of the Assamese people in different spheres of its national life. A synthesis among the diverse ethnic and cultural elements of the State also took place in this period owing to the activities of many factors. All these factors working together helped the emergence of a powerful Assamese nation in this Medieval period. Along with the Britishers new thoughts and ideas poured into Assam from the Western World. Hence, the period from the advent of the Ahoms to the advent of the Britishers, i.e., from the beginning of the 13th century A.D. to the beginning of the 19th century A.D., forms a distinct phase of our cultural history usually designated as Medieval period of Assam's history.

(b) The Assamese Society

To have a clear-cut idea of the jurisdiction of the Medieval Assamese Society, it will require a little more explanation. The idea of the Medieval Assamese Society consists of two main things, i.e., its area and the people
living inside it. Elsewhere... we are discussing about the different kingdoms that were within the boundary of Medieval Assam, which will enable us to know about the area inhabited by the Assamese people. John pater Wade, in his book, 'An account of Assam', published in the Christian era 1800 A.D., writing about the boundary of Assam said that once the kingdom of Bhutan and Nepal were included within Assam; the kingdom of Tippera, Kochbehar and the kingdoms that were on the west of Karatoya were within the boundary of Assam. The kingdom of Manipur, Jayantia, Khāsiā and the hilly regions like Naga, Singpho, Garo, Bhot, Akā, Daflā etc. were within the political boundary of Assam. But as to the area of the Assamese Society we cannot point out to the exact area of the then-political Assam. Strictly speaking, the whole Brahmaputra valley and the kingdom of Kamata or Koch should come within the range of the Assamese Society. This means, besides the Brahmaputra valley of modern Assam, the districts of Kochbehar and Jalpaiguri, now included in West Bengal, would come within the periphery of the Medieval Assamese Society. K.L. Barua and Dr. B.K. Kakati go to the extent of saying that Rungpure, Dinajpore and portions of Maimansingh now included in West Bengal and East Pakistan should come within the boundary of Assam.

A detailed discussion about the people of the land will be made later on. It is a known fact that Assam is the home-land of different heterogeneous racial elements; but these heterogeneous racial elements were forced to combine together to form a strong homogeneous Assamese Society by the political and cultural activities of the period, for which, this period would remain remarkably significant in the history of Assam. The Assamese Society of the Medieval period, therefore, includes people of various ethnic groups, living...
in Assam. In the formation and development of the Assamese Society, the contributions made by these peoples can in no way be neglected. There existed a cordial relationship between the people of plains and the people of the hilly regions in those days. Some of the letters that were exchanged between the Ahom kings and the kings of the hilly regions best reveal the spirit of that cordial relationship. For example, one of the Jayantia kings wrote to the Ahom king Chakradhvaja Singha: "I donot consider Gargacons and Jayantia to be two different capitals, I consider them to be one. One who attempts to bring disunity between the two, must fall from the truth". Even if it is so, it is not possible to bring under the purview of the Medieval Assamese Society all the hilly regions and kingdoms and the people living there for elaborate discussion here, as each of the different tribes, we think, would require a separate provision for such investigation. However, we are making stray references of these people, specially, of the people living on the fringes of the hills on all sides of the Brahmaputra valley, in course of our discussions. So, in the context of the Medieval Assamese Society, we include the people living in the Brahmaputra valley, including the hill peoples living on the fringes of the hills encircling the valley and those of the modern districts of Kochbehary and Jalpaiguri, now included in West Bengal, which were integral parts of the kingdoms of Kamata and Kochbehary in the Medieval period. We will also make stray references to the hill people in general, in our discussions, now and then.

3. Sources:

For the study of the Medieval Assamese Society we depend mainly upon the contemporary historical and biographical literatures. We have already
said that owing to the dearth of proper historical records, our predecessors in their study of the ancient period had to tap many other sources to present a complete picture of that period. Although it is true that "Chronology is not the sole test of historical work" yet it cannot be denied that owing to the paucity of chronology a reliable frame-work of history is always a difficult task. We will try to show that the historical works of our period are large in number and they are free from defects. Besides historical and biographical works, which are the primary sources for our investigation, we will supplement our findings from literary works composed during the period under investigation and oral traditions transmitted from generation to generation. Along with the historical works, we will now and then take help of some 'Accounts' collected and published during the subsequent centuries by some learned and inquisitive local and foreign scholars, which contain many first hand valuable informations of the period, with certain amount of caution where necessary. Now we will proceed to discuss the primary sources: (a) historical and (b) biographical literatures of the period.

(a) Historical literature:

The Indian term that is generally used as the equivalent of history is 'Itihasa'. Both 'Purana' and 'Itihasa' are almost identical. But these terms 'Itihasa' and 'Purana' with their extensive range of denotations cannot be accepted as equivalent of the more restricted modern term 'History'. 'Itihasa' or 'Purana' includes many things to be learnt for the attainment of all-round development by a man living in
If there were any historical literature composed during the reign of the kings of ancient Kāmarupa, they were all desultory and on the line of 'Itiḥāsa' lacking in proper historical treatment of the modern sense. Even quasi-historical works like 'Yogini Tantra', 'Kālikā Purāṇa' and 'Dīpikā-chanda' which are supposed to have been composed during the period of our discussion are not free from such defects and are all based on sectarian belief. But the historical literatures, the foremost source of our study, are above all such defects and their authenticity or historicity can be relied upon for any historical investigation.

The histories or the 'Buranjis', as they are called in Assamese, are the great contribution to the Assamese literature made by the Shan descendants, popularly known as Ahoms who migrated to Assam early in the 13th century A.D. With this new branch of historiography, Assamese literature occupied an unique position amongst the Indian literatures which no other Indian literature can claim. Sir G.A. Grierson, in his work 'Linguistic survey of India', remarks: "The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study, in which, India as a rule is curiously deficient. The historical works or Buranjis as they are styled by the Assamese are numerous and voluminous", During their rule of about six hundred years, a large number of chronicles were written, both in Ahom and Assamese

\[\text{Rgyajuh Sāmatharvākhyāḥ Veda-chatvāra Uddhṛtāḥ/}
\text{Itiḥāsa Purānancha Panchamo Veda uchyate //}
\text{** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** **}
\text{Dharmārtha Kāmamokṣānāmupadeśā Samanvitam/}
\text{Purvavṛtā Kathāyuktamitiḥāsam Prachāsate //}
\]
language, of which surely a negligible number have come down to our hands. We are discussing elsewhere about the enemies of manuscripts in Assam; they are the damp climate of Assam, the ant, the natural calamities, such as earthquake, flood, storm, fire etc. The great civil war known as 'Mowāmariā Bidroh' and the three successive Burmese attacks, towards the last part of the Ahom rule, might have destroyed and carried away a large number of manuscripts. Kirtichandra Barbarua, the chief executive officer of the Ahom king Rajeswar Singha (A.D. 1751 - A.D. 1769), caused a large number of chronicles burnt to ashes, which were suspected by him as having references to his ignominous descent. On the other hand, a sufficient number of manuscripts of the traditional family archives are still lying unexplored as their conservative owners do not want to part with them.

For a distinct idea of the range of our sources, i.e., the chronicles of Medieval Assam, an attempt has been made to give below a classification of them, in our own way, differing a little from late A.R. Dhekial Phukan and Dr. S.K. Bhuyan. We may divide the chronicles of our period into the following classes:

1. Chronicles of the Ahom kings of Assam: - These chronicles were composed during the period from 1228 A.D., from the advent of Ahoms to Assam, to the termination of their rule in 1826 A.D. or continued up to some decades more of the British occupation.

2. Chronicles of countries other than Assam: - This class of chronicles includes the chronicles of Burdwan, Kashmir, chronicles dealing
with the affairs of Mogul-India and a chronicle of Tripura, written in 1724 A.D. We have, however, some reliable testimony of the chronicles of Kashmir and Burdwan which are unfortunately lost. An Assamese manuscript-chronicle of Burdwan was exhibited in the Bengal literary conference, held at Burdwan, by late Pt. Nemchandra Goswami, where it was unfortunately lost. The Assam Government published a chronicle of Tripura, written in 1724 A.D., in the year 1938, obtaining a manuscript from the British Museum, London.

(3) Chronicles of the diplomatic embassies or the Kataki Buranjis:—From these chronicles we can acquire knowledge of the external relations of Assam. Besides many diplomatic letters, these chronicles contain accounts of receptions accorded to the Assamese Ambassadors.

(4) Fragmentary chronicles:—This class of chronicles deals with particular episodes, events, tribes, such as the Kacharis, the Chutiäs and the Jayantiäs and they are like monographs. In this class we can include the metrical chronicles of the Rajas of Darrang and also a manuscript containing an account of the tribute paid to Mirjumla. All these manuscripts are in Assamese and are generally tagged on to chronicles of the first two classes. The metrical chronicles of the Rajas of Darrang are generally known as 'Darrang Rajvamsāvali' and contain considerable amount of informations for us. Amongst these chronicles, the 'Darrang Rajvamsāvali' composed by Suryyakhari Daivajna under the patronage of Samudranarayana (A.D. 1798) and the 'Rajvamsāvali' composed by Ratikanta Dvija under the patronage of Khadganarayana, are important ones. These historical epics contain historical accounts of
the kingdom of Kochbehar and its branch kingdoms, viz., Bijni, Darrang and Beltola. They have got some points of distinct difference with the chronicles of Ahoms, in their treatment. Almost all the chronicles of the Ahom kingdom are written in prose and full justice has been done to preserve the dignity of truth, making no room for imagination at all, while the Rājvamsāvalis are written in verse, in the style of an epic, eulogising the royal patron of the author, with a degree of free imagination. Still then, historical facts are there, which give us the chance to look into the manifold social activities of the State.

(5) Chronicles of the religious monasteries or the Satrīm Buranjis.

(6) The family chronicles or the Vamsāvalis: Some of the influential families of Assam have their Vamsāvalis or the family chronicles. These family chronicles give us historical accounts of the origin of different families, their genealogies and the important role played by the members of these families in the affairs of the State. So these family chronicles throw ample light on the contemporary social history of Assam.

(7) Chronicals written during the early part of the British rule: Some reputed Assamese gentlemen coming into contact with the western civilisation during the early part of the British rule, began to rewrite the history of Assam on western models. The most noteworthy amongst them are Maniram Dewan, Haliram Dhekiel Phukan, Radhanath Barbaru, Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, Harakanta Sarma (Sadaramin) and Rai Gunabhiram Barua Bahadur.

The historiography is a great contribution made by the Ahoms to the Assamese culture. Enriched by this culture, Assamese literature proved to be an exception to the complaint made by the western scholars, regarding the
paucity of historical literature of Hindu-India. The Ahoms, who are a branch of the great Thai-Chinese people, accounts their origin from A.D. 568, when the fore-fathers of the Ahom kings are said to have descended from heaven. Some of the chronicles of the Ahom kings go back to that year. The Burmese and Siamese, who also belong to the same branch, have chronicles of their own countries, in their own languages, known as AZAWINS and P'ONGSA WADANS, respectively. But the first Ahom king Sukapha entered into Assam in A.D. 1228. As soon as he entered into Assam, he ordered his attendant-scholars to note down whatever new thing they had to come across and whatever had happened to them in this new land. This is the beginning of the chronicles in Assam and since then the system of writing chronicles began to develop in this land.

'Buranji', the Assamese equivalent of 'History', is a word of Ahom origin. In the Ahom language, the word 'Bu' means ignorant, 'Ran' means useful knowledge and 'Ji' means the store-house; hence the meaning of the whole word 'Buranji' is a store-house of useful knowledge for the ignorant. The very meaning of the word itself indicates what amount of respect and regard the Ahoms maintained for their Buranjis. According to the tradition of the Ahoms, the knowledge of the Buranjis was an indispensable accomplishment of a gentleman. For the administration of the country, the Ahoms had no written constitution; they conducted the administrative affairs of the State by looking into the parallel precedents recorded in their chronicles, when they thought it necessary. The children of the princes and nobles were imparted education from the chapters of their chronicles. Not only that, the Ahoms had the custom of (even now it is in vogue) reciting chapters from the Buranjis whenever a marriage took place in their families. Every family of some status in the State had at least a manuscript copy of chronicles in their possession. Besides the royal court,
individually, the Ahom priests, known as Deodhai, and the nobles preserved chronicles containing reliable continuous narrative account of the rule of the Ahom kings, written from time to time. On the whole, the Ahoms had deep respect for the chronicles; they kept it as great secret and did not disclose about it to persons who were not proved worthy of confidence. In the preamble of the chronicles of the 'Tungkhungi' dynasty, written at the instance of Srinath Duara Barbarua, the following words of apology were thus made: "Salutation to Srikrisha! Salutation to Ganesa! Salutation to Goddess Parvati! This is the Buranji caused to be written in Saka 1725 by the Duara Barbarua; keep it secretly. Do not give it even to your son, if you have no confidence in him. Show it to one who is unhostile and well-disposed towards you. Pandits have prohibited the betrayal of princes; and if trust is violated it amounts to an insult shown to one's mother. So keep it in confidence; more especially it is an unfathomable 'Sastra', who even finds its bottom. Even great sages become victims of confession in such matters, which I have handed with whatever judgment I can command. So pandits should not at random find fault with this book. If one is bent upon detecting blemishes, he will find many. This is the 'Vamsavali' or history of the Sawrgodeos or kings of Tungkhungia dynasty. This history is caused to be written on Thursday, the twenty second of Phalguna on the Panchami Tithi'.

At the capital of the Ahom kings, there was a department attached to the secretariat for the writing of the chronicles where a large number of scribes served under the supervision of an officer, known as Likhakar Barua.
About the materials and procedure of writing manuscripts, a discussion will be made below. In the compilation work, the chronicles were given free access to all the necessary state papers, including dispatches from local administrators and commanders, diplomatic correspondence, court minutes recorded from day to day, as well as proceedings from important judicial trials. Individually the chronicles were compiled by nobles either under their immediate supervision or by themselves. Sometimes the eager persons also managed to get a copy of the chronicles to be preserved in their family archives. The chronicles under the Govt. management were kept in a store-house called Gandhia Bhadal, with all other Govt. papers, in the capital.

Now, there are chronicles, we have in our hands, written both in Ahom and Assamese language. Edward Gait infers that the chronicles written in the earlier part of the Ahom administration are of Ahom language; later on when they accepted the Assamese language as the major vehicle of expression in the country, it came to be used in the writing of their chronicles. So, the chronicles written during the Ahom rule can be divided into two. From the viewpoint of their medium, viz (i) chronicles written in Ahom language and (ii) chronicles written in Assamese language. Some of the chronicles written in Assamese language were translated by late Rai Shaheb Golap Chandra Barua and they were all published in a volume with the title 'Ahom-Buranji' by the Assam Government in the year 1930. Almost all the chronicles written in Assamese are in prose. Historical literature written in Assamese prose began to play an important role in the history of the Assamese prose literature towards the later part of the 17th century. Most of the important chronicles, written in Assamese and
now in our possession, were written in the later part of the 17th and in the 18th century, and in fact, this is the period in which Assamese historical literature fully developed under the patronage of the Ahom kings. Chronicles, written in Assamese verse, are very few; we have two such chronicles, viz, the 'Kalibhurat-Buranji' and the 'Belimurar Buranji', composed by Dutiram Hazarika and Viseswar Baidyadhipa respectively. These chronicles edited by Dr. S.K. Bhuyan, have been published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, in 1932. The first one gives an account of Assam of the period from 1679 A.D. to 1858 A.D.; and the second deals with the events of the period during which the Ahom kings Gaurinath Singha and Chandra Kanta Singha were on the throne of Assam, i.e., the period in which the Ahom power dwindled into a stage of collapse as a result of the great civil war known as 'Moamaria Bidroh' and the three successive ghastly invasions made by the Burmese. Dr. S.K. Bhuyan places the date of the second one, in between 1833 and 1846 A.D. In the history of the evolution and development of Assamese prose literature, historical literature has a significant position of its own.

The chronicles were written down from time to time; so, there are very few chronicles wherein we may expect to get a full picture of the whole Ahom period. Even if there are chronicles, which cover the whole period, it so happens, that some portions of the period are found very inadequately dealt with. This was not with a view to neglect the reign of the king or kings of that particular period but due to the fact that the neglected portion has already been thoroughly dealt with in some other works. Sometimes, owing to the change of hands of persons in charge of writing chronicles, the portion of the chronicle under writing during the change-over, is seen
not properly dealt with. Although it is not possible to get a complete picture of the whole Ahom rule in one chronicle at a time, yet there is every possibility of getting the same by arraying the chronicles one after another composed from time to time and by incorporating the well-treated portion of one chronicle with the neglected corresponding portion of the other. As for instance, let us take the example of the complete and valuable chronicle written in Ahom language, from the earliest time to the end of the Ahom rule, referred to by Edward Gait. This is most probably the chronicle which was translated from Ahom language by Rai Shaheb Golap Chandra Barua. It would be worth-mentioning here, what the Rai Shaheb speaks about this chronicle. He states, "The Buranji deals with events concerning the Ahoms only, from the earliest times to the end of their rule. This Buranji is almost complete, but it gives a very meagre account of the reign of the great Ahom king, Rudra Singha—only the dates of his enthronement and death being given. This was perhaps due to the charge of writing Buranji changed hands. There is another Buranji in Ahom from the death of Gadadhar Singha to the reign of Lakhmi Singha, wherein a full account of the reign of Rudra Singha is given. If the portion containing Rudra Singha's reign should have been incorporated in this Buranji, the record of Ahom reign would have been very complete." So, the reason, why the reign of the great Ahom king Rudra Singha was not elaborately dealt with in this chronicle, can be easily understood, from the above extract. If one period of the Ahom rule is not given its due importance in one chronicle, we may supplement that portion from another chronicle. In one of the chronicles, the writer mentioning the great battle of Saraighat
in a few lines, says: "There are elaborate description of this war in other chronicles; therefore, I did not write about it here." Instances of undue elaboration, exaggeration or omission of certain historical facts are not rare in our chronicles. Dr. S.K. Bhuyan is of opinion that "self importance, family animosity or tribal jealousies" are mainly responsible for these defects. However, we can thrash out the truth by critically examining the various copies of the same chronicle received from different quarters. To make the chronicles up-to-date, along with the advancement of time, the Government and the individual both always supplemented them with new materials at their disposal. As the Buranjis were always written and supplemented contemporaneously, they contain greater amount of truth and validity with eye-witnessed facts and figures.

As to the validity of the Assamese historical literature, scholars like Edward Gait, antiquarian Pt. H.C. Goswami and Dr. S.K. Bhuyan, who rendered great services for the spade-work and historical research in Assam, have made valuable remarks. Edward Gait remarks: "They (the Ahoms) were endowed with the inexhaustible historical faculty in a very high degree...... The historicity of these Buranjis is proved not only by the way in which they support each other, but also by the confirmation which is afforded by the narratives of Muhammadan writers, wherever these are available for comparison. Their chronology is further supported by the dates on various records which have been collected and collated for the purpose of checking it, including those on about 70 coins, 48 copper plates, nine rock and 28 temple inscriptions and six inscriptions on cannon." According to H.C. Goswami, it was the Ahoms who first introduced the system
of writing chronicles in a scientific method, in Assam. The facts of the chronicles are not twisted and the language is simple and straight. The chronicles were written in such simple and unequivocal language that no different interpretation of the facts can be given. The descriptions are abridged, nevertheless they convey the ideas in full. Further, there is no attempt to conceal the truth; even many things concerning the royal families or the nobles, the publication of which are considered objectionable, are freely discussed in them. That was why, once a large number of chronicles were burnt to ashes, during the rule of king Rajeswar Singha under the influence of Kirtichandra Barbarua, when one Numali Bor Gohain in his most venomous work 'Chakaripheti Buranji' (cobra-chronicle) raised a shocking question as to the purity of Barbarua's descent. Such instances of free discussions in the chronicles are not few and far between. The chronicles were written by persons who were contemporaneous of events and were fully equipped with knowledge of the internal and external affairs of the State. On many occasions the discussions that were held between the king and his ministers, either at the royal assembly or at the dinner table, were recorded in the chronicles. Anything that was recorded, was very accurate and thorough. For example, let us cite a typical extract:—

"Then all the officials of the higher rank after due deliberation made Gadadhar Singha king at Kaliabar on the 18th danda of Thursday the 20th Sravana, in the year 1603 Saka. On Thursday the 27th, advancing upwards, they arrived at Garagun towards the end of the night, before four dandas for the break of the day. Making camp on the bank of the lotus-tank within the walls of the royal rempart, the king sent the
Chāmaguriā king to the hill and put him to death there. He (Chāmaguriā king) enjoyed the throne for one year four months and fifteen days. On Saturday the 21st of Phālguna, thunder fell upon the king's house on the hill. On Sunday the 22nd, the king ascended the Sinharighar. On Monday, when four dandas were more for the end of the day, the king sat upon the Singhapira (wooden seat supported by wooden lions). Just on the 10th danda of Tuesday the 24th, he (the king) ascended the royal throne and accepted the name Gadadhar Singha. The Majumdar, writing that name with a pen of gold, read it aloud for the hearing of the Patra-mantri (cabinet). To sum up, when a war was declared, and our army marched to the battle field, facts about the strength of our army and who won the battle with what amount of loss or gain, are found in the chronicles accurately described. Descriptions of natural calamities, like earthquake, flood, storm, fire etc. are found recorded with their dates, the particular time of occurrence and the damage done. So also, details about a king's demise, accession and enthronement and coronation are faithfully described in the chronicles. Detailed description of the architectural composition, design and also quantities of materials used in the construction of temples, palaces, ramparts, bridges etc. of the Ahom age were given in the chronicles of Changrung Phukan, who was in charge of public works. Accounts of other departments are also found systematically recorded in their books.

Another notable aspect of the chronicles is that they are full of expressions of noble patriotic sentiments made by the great political personalities of the State at different critical moments of the national life. Their importance cannot be minimised even according to modern standpoint.
There is a considerable number of stories and fables in the chronicles, the presence of which in such historical works, seem unjustified at the first glance. Nevertheless, they have some value; these stories and allegories were used by the politicians to comment upon contemporary political events. In addition to this, they added literary flavour to the textual facts of the chronicles. In our present work, we are mainly concerned with social, economic and cultural conditions of Medieval Assam. The chronicles are packed up with materials of these aspects and furnish us with facts concerning different aspects of the Medieval Assamese people, such as: different races and castes, their admixture, different religions and their sects, conversion to Hinduism, manners and customs of the people, industries, material condition of the people, art and culture etc. In the chronicles one is sure to meet with description of some unnatural or abnormal events, the reality of which no-body can conceive. For example, events like darkness prevailing at day time, raining red, yellow or black, sprouting of boiled paddy, bearing of rice (the grain without the husk) by paddy plant, dog giving birth to a hog, the story of a gigantic man under the earth, the story of a golden comb etc. are found vividly described in the chronicles. The story of the gigantic man runs thus: "Coming out to his court, one day the king (Shuhummmung, alias Dihingia Raja) ordered his men to construct a rampart alongside the Naga hill, in order to make a line of demarcation. At the first stroke of the hoe a man appeared. The hoe struck at his arm. Then that man asked the diggers why they made him out. Our people informed him of their ignorance
of his presence. Then he (the gigantic man) asked about the direction of
the course of the river Lohit (Brahmaputra). Our people informed him that
the river flew alongside the northern hills. The man said that the age of
Kali began and ordered them to bury him again there. The people accordingly
buried him and informed the king about the incident. The king quieried
about the size of the man. The people said that they only saw the arm of
the man which was equal to an elephant. Then the men were forbidden to
construct the rampart and henceforth the mountain came to be known as
Deoparbat (mountain associated with the spirit). It is not possible to
find out any material truth behind these unnatural events recorded in the
chronicles; however, the common belief of the common people is that when
a bad event in our national or individual life takes place, it is always
preceded by a bad omen. Just before the invasion of Mirjumla, who defeated
the Assamese people miserably, for the first time, during the Ahom rule,
the then ruling king Jayadhvaja Singha, one day suddenly saw his meal red,
while he was taking it from his royal dish. This is nothing but an
indication of the impending calamity that was awaiting king Jayadhvaja
Singha, as well as the nation. With the exception of these stories and fables, one can resort to the Medieval Assamese chronicles as the best
reliable sources of information for any historical investigation of the
period.

(b) Biographical Literature:

The next important source for our study is the biographies of
Medieval saints. The system of writing biographies of the saints, popularly
known as 'Charit-puthis', was introduced amongst the Vaisnavite people of
Assam, in the last part of the seventeenth century and it continued up to
the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the biographies, the day-to-day experiences and incidents of the saints' lives were recorded. Written from purely devotional point of view, this is a kind of religious literature, both in prose and verse, and it includes the biographies of Sankardeva, Damodardeva, Madhavdeva, Bañši Gopal, Gopal Atā, Banamalideva, Badulā Atā, and a host of others. The authors of the biographies were disciples of the respective saints of their sects, and they wrote these works either from their direct knowledge, or from sacred tradition handed down to them from their predecessors. These biographies are, therefore, considered to be the most human and realistic documents of Assamese literature. They throw a flood of light upon the contemporary social life of the people, such as, the religious rite rites and ceremonies, manners and customs, the Vaisnavite movement and institutions, education and educational institutions etc. and as such, they possess immense historical value for our studies. The biographies were usually written by people associated with the Satra institutions, under the different Vaisnavite sects.

There was a custom, prevalent amongst the Vaisnavite devotees of Assam, to discuss or to read a few chapters from the biography of their religious preceptor, just after the recitation of the Holy names (Nāma-kīrtana) according to their daily routine. This custom was traditionally handed down to them. But who introduced this custom and when and how? Sankardeva was the founder-preceptor of Vaisnavism in Assam; when he was living, there was no such system of discussing the biographies of saints. During the lifetime of Śākap Sankardeva, only the incarnatory deeds of Lord Krisna, the only supreme God-head recognised by the Vaisnavites of Assam, narrated
in the holy books the 'Krṣ́tana' and the 'Nāmghosā', were often related after the recital of the Holy names. In one of the biographies it is said: "From Batadrawā to Pātbausi the procedure was this: After the recital of the Holy names, the devotees asked about the incarnatory deeds of Krṣ́na and Balobhadra. The saint Sankardeva discussed amongst them (disciples) about the ten and twenty-two incarnations of Krṣ́na with the activities of his brother Balobhadra and they listened to it in rapt attention and with great devotion. But, after Sankardeva, according to his direction, it is said in the biography, that Madhavdeva began to narrate the biography of his preceptor Sankardeva, amongst the devotees, after their daily recitals." Thus, this system of discussing the daily activities of their preceptors' life became a regular feature of their daily recital and thenceforth the system came to be prevalent amongst all the Vaisnavite people of Assam.

In his life time, Madhavdeva himself narrated the activities of Sankardeva's life from his personal experience...with great devotion. Gradually the system began to spread amongst the Vaisnavite people all over Assam. In the different village-chapels (Nāmghar) and Satra institutions, the experienced and devoted disciples and the Adhikāras (Head of the Satra), respectively, were in-charge of narrating the biography of Sankardeva. At the first stage, only the biography of Sankardeva was discussed; but during the later part of Madhavdeva's life, schism took place amongst the Vaisnavite church and under the leadership of different preceptors, different sects, known as Samhātis, began to grow up. From this time onwards, instead of narrating the biography of
Sankardeva alone, the different sects might have included the discussions of their respective preceptor's biography as a part of their daily recital. In course of time, the discussion of day-to-day activities of religious Saints or preceptors reached a greater phase and it came to be observed with great devotion, as a ritual, amongst the Vaisnavites of Assam. This tradition of reading the biographies of the Saints had been observed regularly by the disciples on the occasions of the celebration of the birth and death ceremonies of the Saints of their respective sects.

As stated above, the biographies were written by the disciple-authors, purely with a religious bent of mind and an attempt to deify or to raise their heroes from human level to that of the incarnation of God Himself is very prominently seen throughout these works. In order to justify their supernatural powers, innumerable miraculous actions were attributed to these saints. For example, in one of the biographies, it is said, that the great saint Sankardeva in his pilgrimage, at the temple of Jagannatha, met and discussed with the immortal Vaisnavas like Hanuman, Bibhisana, Jambuvanta etc. of previous ages, besides the contemporary Vaisnava saints of other parts of India. Again, one day, the Koch king Nachrayana disclosed to the court-scholars his desire of listening the whole 'Bhagavata Purana' in one sitting and accordingly asked to prepare an abridged edition of it, to enable him to listen to the same, the next day. All other scholars failed only Sankardeva could succeed. For the whole night, with a superhuman form of four hands he prepared and composed the work 'Gunadala', the abridged edition of 'Bhagavata Purana', and read it out completely to the king in his sitting at the court, the next day. Such examples are numerous in the
biographies. All over the world the biographies of the medieval prophets are the same; it is the common trait of the hagiography that the heroes are raised from the human level to the incarnation of God Himself. and our biographies are not an exception to this. Late Lakshminath Bezbarua (A.D.1868-1938), the undisputed authority of the Vaisnavaite literature of Assam, admits this in connection with our biographies also. But in our discussions we will take into account only the probable portions of it, excluding the supernatural. Further, this also cannot be denied that some of the authors or scribes either with a sectarian bias or with a view of the fulfilling their designed motive, manipulated things in the biographies of the saints, which were not true. In this respect the scribes and editors are more responsible. Late Bezbarua strongly warns the readers to be cautious about these facts while studying the biographies of the saints.35 For example, one of the much spoken biography, known as 'Kathā-Gurucharit', edited by Prof. U.C.Lekharu and published by H.N.Dutta Barua, is full of such discrepancies. Though it contains innumerable real facts of the Medieval Assamese society yet the contradictory facts so often met with in this biography cannot be overlooked. The names of some of the authors of some biographies are suspected to be spurious. L.N. Bezbarua mentions the author of such a biography, viz., 'Ādicharit'. This biography is known among the Vaisnavaites to be written by Sankardeva's most favourite disciple Madhavdeva. Late Bezbarua rejects its' authorship of Madhavdeva on the grounds that the description of Sankardeva's forefathers given in this biography differs absolutely from the description given in the biography written by Ramcharan Thakur, nephew of Madhavdeva, and Dvijabhusan. Had this 'Ādicharit' been actually written by Madhavdeva,
the difference as regards the forefathers of Sankardeva would never have occurred between the two. Because Madhavdeva was the maternal uncle of Ramcharan Thakur and he (Ramcharan Thakur) was brought up and educated by Madhavdeva; naturally Ramcharan Thakur wrote in the biography of Sankardeva what he learnt from Madhavdeva. On the other hand, the language and style of 'Adicharit' failed to make us convinced that they are from the mighty pen of Madhavdeva. Therefore, this Madhavdeva was some other Madhavdeva and we cannot recognise this biography to be a genuine one. Again, some of the Vaishnavaites do not accept the biography written by Ramcharan Thakur; they are of opinion that Ramcharan of this particular biography was another Ramcharan of Kantari. Had there been a biography written by Ramcharan Thakur, then his son Daityari Thakur would have never written another biography of Sankardeva. Daityari Thakur says that he had written the biography from the knowledge directly acquired from his father. Besides, nowhere in his work, he has mentioned about a biography written by his father, which led some Vaishnavaites to believe that Ramcharan, the nephew of Madhavdeva, had written no biography and they regard the biography written by Daityari as authentic and not the one written by Ramcharan Thakur.

The biographies were written both in verse and prose. The number of biographies written in verse is large. So far only one important work, containing the biographies of almost all the Vaishnavite saints, with the exception of Damodardeva and Harideva, written in prose, has come down to our hands, edited by Prof. U.C. Lekheru, This voluminous work was published by late H.N. Dutta Barua and now it is prescribed as a text book of the
Post-graduate Assamese class of the Gauhati University. We have said above, that this biography contains many incongruities; but these incongruities cannot hinder our work. We will only pick up those social facts which are commonly found in other biographies also. Incongruities are found in facts concerning the dates of birth or death of the saints and the philosophy of their faiths. We are not much concerned about these facts.

But this is the most voluminous biography, dealing with almost all the Vaisnavaite saints of Medieval Assam, beginning from Sankardeva, the founder-preceptor, to Sri Rama, the ninth preceptor of the Vaisnavaites of Assam. Hence it is a store-house of materials for our studies. In the reference of the Vaisnavaite preceptors in the book, Sri Rama, the ninth preceptor takes the last place; hence some scholars following the date of Sri Rama, maintain the view that this work was composed just after 1638 Saka year, i.e., A.D. 1716. This is a reasonable view no doubt. There are references of English people in the work, which also indicate that the work was written after the advent of the Britishers to India. So, this work covers a long period from the beginning of the 15th century to the 18th century. From a study of this book, besides the movement and progress of Vaisnavism in Assam, we can collect information about the awakening of learning during this period, such as the trend of the people towards education, its institutions, syllabus, the method of imparting education, and the centres of learning. It gives us ample information regarding the social, economic, cultural and political condition of the period. The book is a treasure-house of information on religious beliefs, custom and superstitions of the Assamese people. It gives a vivid account of the ordeal system prevalent at that time. Moreover, the work enlightens us about different industries,
trade and commerce, routes of communication, slave system and many other such information of national interest.

The other biographies, written in verse, supply us, more or less the same materials. Amongst the biographies written in verse, the 'Gurucharit' by Ramcharan Thakur, 'Sri Sri Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhavdava chaitra' by Daityari Thakur, 'Sri Gurucharit' by Ramananda Dvija, 'Damodordava chaitra' by Nilakantha Das, 'Sri Sri Banamali Deva-charitra' by Ramananda Dvija, 'Sri Sri Banamali Deva-charitra' by Ramakanta Dvija, 'Gurulila' by Ram Rai etc. are important ones. All the biographies inform us about the procedure of the routine of the daily life, by which the pontiffs and the nobles spent their days at that time. Thus, in the study of the Medieval Assamese society, the biographies of the Medieval Saints of Assam render very valuable services to us.

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