

**AMONG
THE
LUMINARIES
IN
ASSAM**

ANJALI SARMA



Biography has so long been a neglected branch of Assamese literature, as it has been in many other Indian literatures. Though biographical works have not been insignificant and though biographical writings have a long tradition in Assamese literature, Assamese biography has received very little critical attention.

The present book is a pioneering work on Assamese biography. After defining biography in the light of Western and ancient Indian theories, it surveys Assamese biography systematically for the first time from its beginning in the medieval times till today. First, the medieval Assamese hagiographies depicting the lives of Assamese Vaiṣṇavite saints and preachers like Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are discussed. With the establishment of the British rule, Western biographical tradition influenced Assamese literature when nationalist political leaders, social reformers, men of letters, scientists and industrialists came to be the subjects of biographies. Assamese biographies of the British and post-British periods with such heroes are discussed in later chapters.

In conclusion, the author has dwelt on the general adulatory tone of most Assamese biographies that tend to show the subjects as human beings *par excellence*, if not an super-human beings. During the Vaiṣṇava period when the Vaiṣṇava hagiographies were written with a propagandist bias, the tone naturally got adulatory, and the subjects exaggerated as super-human beings. Even biographies during the British period could be so because these were then written with a nationalist urge. But why is the same spirit persistent even today? The author poses the question and then goes to find out the cause of this.

The book is bound to prove useful not only for the teachers and the students of literature and comparative literature of undergraduate, post-graduate, M. Phil., and Ph. D. levels, but also for the readers and writers of biography and for general readers.

Rs. 300

Dr. Anjali Sarma (b. 1942) teaches Assamese literature and language in Handique Girls' College, Gauhati—the oldest premier institute of higher education for girls in Assam. An M.A. and Ph.D. in Assamese from the University of Gauhati, she is a reputed teacher who also writes and broadcasts about literature and culture. She has contributed to the multi-volume *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* brought out by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

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(A Study of Assamese Biography)

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ANJALI SARMA



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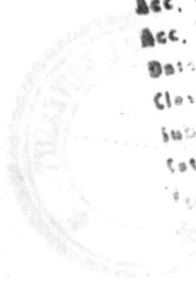
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To

My parents

Sri Lakshminath Sarma & Srimati Aparajita Devi

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ANJALI SARMA

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 *Vaiṣṇavite* 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, 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 *Vaiṣṇavite* hagiographies or to some modern biographical works. But this is only to draw sociological or historical materials from those 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 indifference to biography on the part of our major critics, we have at least two 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. Neog in the thirties added a note to a biographical essay he wrote¹ on the tradition of the New Biography. This note, though brief, was the first discussion in Assamese of the New Biography. Likewise, Sarma in the early sixties wrote an essay on the Assamese *caritas*² which was our first critical observation of the *Vaiṣṇavite* hagiographies as biography—a branch of literature.

After Neog and Sarma, there appeared for a while, another generation of writers and critics. They too were totally indifferent to this branch of literature. Hiren Gohain and Bhaben Barua belonged to a still later generation of critics; and their lack of concern with this branch has already been noted.

After Gohain and Barua, however, we have had another writer, Gobinda 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 methodically³, not only the nature, art and history of biography, but has also classified Assamese biographical works in a critical survey of Assamese biography.⁴ He has also discussed in an article⁵ the problems and limitations of Assamese biography.

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.

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 Gobinda Prasad Sarma, referred to already. Further, 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 attempting 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 the gap in the study of Assamese biography as a branch of literature.

In this survey, I would try my best to cover all Assamese biographies. However, if the qualities of some works are such that they do not deserve 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 are nowhere 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 the best efforts would be made to cover them all.

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, *Rūp Tirthar Yātrī* (The Pilgrim of Beauty, 1963), a novel on the life of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, *Baṅḍukābehār* (Two place names, 1976), a novel on the life of Mādhavadeva by Medini Chaudhury, and *Ferengādāo* (A bird's name, 1982), a novel on

the life of Bishnu Rava, also by Medini Chaudhury, are not discussed in this work. Novelised Biographies, on the other hand, are biographies, though they resemble a novel in form and style. And thus they would come within the purview of the study.

Let me come now to the method to be followed here. I am going first to define biography; and then to the question of its nature, art and history. All this would be about biography in general, brought here to judge 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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 a second beginning, as it were, again. In this chapter, I would show the values of the society that went into the making of biographies in the two periods, British and pre-British.

In the third chapter, I would come to the Assamese biographies of the first period—*caritas* in verse, and in the fourth chapter, I would discuss the *caritas* in prose which were a later development. In my discussion of the *caritas* 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 *Vaiṣṇava* 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 hagiologists or editors. I would not like to go to any MS. of the period which has not yet been published. My concern here would be always with the printed book only.

The fifth chapter would be dealing with the biographies of the British period. Whatever change came to Assamese biography during this period in its nature and tone under the British influence, is proposed to be shown here. 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 period, as regards man's outlook on man, and the corresponding changes, if any, in the nature and tone of biography and the expansion of the field of biography—these would all be observed here.

In the seventh and last chapter, 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 period, no Assamese writer had 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 period onwards. I have tried my best to use the writers' or subjects' own spellings of their

names and surnames. Various persons, however, spell their 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 goes to the principles of phonetics and uses the spelling Praphulla. 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 persons of the Medieval Age, like Śaṅkaradeva, or words first used in that period, like *carita*. In the Modern Age (British and post-British periods), these names and words have undergone changes in their pronunciation. For example, Śaṅkaradeva is now pronounced as Śaṅkardev, while *carita* is now pronounced as *carit*. 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 system of the Indologists. To be specific, I would follow the *E.I.L. Brochure* of Sahitya Akademi.

In the case of the biographies of the Modern Age, I would use the general spelling system for the titles of books. But very often, the names of the subjects become the titles of the biographies. In such cases, 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 the names of persons of this Age, and also in the case of names of places of this Age, in the cases of names of persons of the ancient or medieval times, diacritical marks would be used. As regards place-names, diacritical

marks would be used only if the place-names do not exist today. In the titles of books, magazines or newspapers, however, diacritical marks would be used if the words there are Indian, and even if such words from the names of persons. As for Indian words in places other than titles, diacritical marks and the Indological spelling system would be used, only when there is absolute necessity. In the case of Indian words very familiar in Indian English or are of non-Sanskrit origin, the general spelling system would be used without any diacritical mark.

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CONCLUSION: LIMITATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

A survey of the biographies in Assamese from their beginning in the seventeenth century till the present times, having thus been made, conclusions would be drawn about their nature, situation and quality with the help of a summary of my findings.

In the first stage of Assamese biography, when the life-stories of the *Vaiṣṇavite* saints were narrated in verse, and also in prose, we see a high amount of encomium and adoration for the subject. All the biographies of this age being on religious preachers, the great amount of praise and the sense of worship in them for the subjects, are rather natural. After all, these were invariably written by the disciples or followers of the subjects, and disciples and followers do generally have unflinching admiration and respect for their *gurus*. The disciple-authors of these biographies, or rather hagiographies, did not as yet have a sense of biography, as we understand it today. They came to write biography with a religious fervour, and thus with a deep sense of adoration for their *gurus*. Writing biographies of the religious *gurus* in that period was nothing but practising religion and spreading it. A scientific narration of the lives of the *gurus* was unthinkable for these writers. They did not see its necessity or utility either. No wonder, we have in these hagiographies inordinate exaggeration, and a huge mass of supernatural elements even. The subjects were never looked upon as ordinary human beings in these works.

However, the values of these hagiographies as biographies of our first period cannot be ignored. In spite of the exaggera-

tions and the supernatural elements, we find in those works detailed accounts of the lives of the religious saints and devotees of those days. Sometimes the narration and description in these become quite poetic and artistic. And very often, these works have been storehouses of a wealth of information about this region of those days, not only in religious matters, but also in political, social, economic and cultural affairs. From this point of view, these hagiographies have been good source-materials, not for the future biographies of these religious saints and devotees and their institutions only, but also for medieval Assam as a whole.

The prose hagiography of the eighteenth century, *Kathā-Gurucarita*, besides being important for the reasons shown above, has still another importance. It points to the rare good use of Assamese prose; and yet its occasional poetic quality has earned for the style of this prose work a distinct place in the history of Assamese prose style.

When we come to the British Age, we come to an entirely new kind of biography. As shown already, the subjects of the biography are no longer looked upon as divine beings. Also the religious persons alone do not become the subjects of biography any more. The subjects are looked upon as human beings now; and their character and personality, and works and deeds, are discussed as those of mortals. But yet it is found that even in these biographies, these mortals, who can be from any field now, have been generally kept above criticism. Even if they are not adored as divine beings now, there pervade throughout in these biographies, a sense of praise for the subjects, and the idea that the subject is infallible. The activities of the subjects are enumerated as activities of the human beings, no doubt; but there is no critical outlook on them. This attitude of holding the subject above criticism, and as an object of undiluted praise, continued from the British age to the post-Independence period, too, unabated. And the post-Independence period did not see any marked development in Assamese Biography, so far as delineating a person in his true colour is concerned.

The undiluted praise for the national and political leaders of the British age who dedicated themselves to the cause of

freedom of our country is, of course, understandable, whether they are praised blindly in the British Age or in the post-Independence period. After all, the biographies in the British Age written on the national leaders served, in the words of Gobinda Prasad Sarma as:

an instrument in our freedom struggle against the British. The spirit behind the composition of these biographies was not so much the spirit of a mere study of the character and personality of the man, as it was to rouse nationalism in the mind of the reader. It is no wonder, the weaknesses of the subjects in the political biographies were ignored.¹

But this tendency to regard the subject as infallible and adore him and praise him for all that he did and was, is to be seen equally well in case of the subjects of other fields, too, both in the British and post-British periods. G.P. Sarma has gone to the reason behind this also, and has observed that the spirit of *guru*-worship that is rooted deeply in the Indian tradition, is actually continuing till today,² though under a different garb from the British period onwards, and under the new term, hero-worship, in place of the old term *guru*-worship. After over thirty years of freedom, we have not been able to take an independent view of our *gurus* and heroes, and look upon them as men, even if they are great. After over a hundred and fifty years of British contact and English education, we have not been able to acquire the British or Western critical attitude, the critical attitude of a Western New Biographer, and discover for ourselves that, even if the persons whose biographies we write are gods or goddesses, they have, at least, the feet of clay.³

Our biographers alone cannot be blamed for this, of course. Our society in general, and the reading public in particular, too, have not been mature enough to digest objective criticism or understand the spirit and utility of this. Here are two examples. This researcher raised before Maheswar Neog once the point of his biographical essay on Bezbaroa, discussed earlier, becoming rather adulatory; even though, as an essay declared to be in the tradition of New Biography, that was

expected to be critical or satirical of the subject. Neog replied that even the little dose of mild criticism that is there in the essay, proved itself to be too much for the readers, when the essay came out first in the late thirties; and he himself became an object of criticism before them for doing his bit. This situation of our pre-Independence society has not improved much after Independence, too. Here is the example of this, already given by G.P. Sarma:

One of our young, perseverant biographers wrote out a biography of one of our cultural heroes recently with great toil. There was an understanding that the biography would be released in the centenary celebration of the hero's birth. But in time, it was found that the celebration of the centenary was past; and the book had to come out to the market without any ceremonious release by the celebration committee. Later the mystery behind this was unfolded. There is a valuable penpicture in the biography of the subject in his childhood, where the subject has been depicted in his backward village as a shabby boy in his torn clothes, with mucus running from his nose. Though this was a picture of rare value in Assamese biography gathered by the biographer with much toil, the off-spring of the subject, now well-established in the city, could not take it easily!⁴

It is clear, therefore, that in the society of us even of the present day, it is not always possible to speak the truth, even if the subject is dead long ago.

But what is the reason behind this? The first reason is, of course, our own Indian tradition. Adverse criticism in the Indian tradition has been always held to be in bad taste. One should only look to the good aspects of persons and things for emulation; and the bad aspects should always be covered. This has been our traditional Indian view; for which, there was not only biography proper in our Indian literature, but also there was no literary criticism of value-judgement in our ancient and medieval literature.

G. P. Sarma has attributed another reason for the lack of

critical attitude in the pre- and post-Independence Assamese biography. He points to the influence of the English literature of the Victorian Age in Assamese society in this respect.⁵ According to Sarma, Victorian English literature, forming a main part of the curriculum of the English subject in schools, colleges and universities of the British days, the students had a thorough grounding in the ideals or spirit of this Age of English literature. They thus imbibed one very prominent British spirit of the Victorian Age, hero-worship, enunciated by one of the most prominent Victorian thinkers, Carlyle. They also imbibed an important quality of a typical Victorian—prudishness. From the students of English literature and language in the colleges and universities, who later became teachers in colleges and schools, this British ideal and this British quality percolated to the Assamese society, and struck root there, as Sarma observes. Because they found an ideal, fertile ground in Assam, or India, where similar ideals were already prevailing. In England, Lytton Starchey and others soon declared a war against such ideals, and became successful to a great extent in creating an atmosphere for criticism of persons where necessary. This *zihad* is yet to be declared in Assamese biography, though Assamese criticism has already acquired the Western tone and spirit.

Another limitation of modern Assamese biography, at least of the vast majority of them, has been that of the subject remaining flat in them. Most of the Assamese biographers prove themselves to be indifferent to collection of materials with sufficient toil either in the library or in the field. They are satisfied with the easily gathered or available facts or records of life of the subject they want to write about. They do not rummage the documents, diaries and letters; or they do not go on interviewing people for information or facts or small details about the subject. No wonder, the subjects do not come out lively in most Assamese biographies.

But for this indifference of the biographers to toil, our biographers alone cannot be held responsible. We, in the Assamese society, lack the habit of preserving materials like diaries and letters. We do not even preserve books, magazines and newspapers to the posterity. Under such circumstances,

even a biographer willing to labour hard for gathering materials, fails to enrich his biography with more and more materials about the subject.

In the whole range of Assamese biography in the modern period, there have actually been very few biographies where the readers do not feel some sort of insufficiency either in information or materials about the subject, or in the way of presentation of them, or in the portraiture of the individual, or in the handling of the language. The reason for this must be that, biography has not yet been accepted as an important branch of literature in Assamese. And for that matter, good writers with literary and artistic talent of high order coupled with a readiness to toil in the libraries and in the fields and with a passionate concern for facts and, at the same time, with an eye for psychology or mental make-up, have not yet turned their attention to this branch of literature. And yet, it is a fact, and the bibliography of this book will bear testimony to it, that in number, if not in volume and size, Assamese biography cannot, by any means, be called poor. And what is the reason behind this?

Against pure creative branches of literature like poetry and fiction, which are generally written with an inner urge, biography which has a dual identity, can be written in response to certain extrinsic demands, too. During the Age of *Vaiṣṇavite* literature, for example, all biographies were written, not so much with any urge for creation, but with the urge of spreading the religion. And during the British Age, most biographies were written with the nationalistic urge, Indian or Assamese. Wherever in biographers, this urge was coupled with the creative urge and the talent required, we had good biographies.

This situation of Assamese biography has been rather deteriorating after Independence. Until Independence, whether it was during the British age or it was during the *Vaiṣṇavite* age, the urge for writing biography, was at least created by a noble sentiment, nationalistic or religious. But the general urge for writing biography after Independence, while still being devoid of the creative urge, lacks that kind of noble sentiment, too. Biographies are now generally written for

such topical interest as the election of a man of letters to the post of the President of the Asam Sahitya Sabha, or the election of some one to the Chief Ministership of the State, or Prime Ministership or Presidency of the country. Biographies are also found coming out on the death of eminent persons, or the centenary celebrations of birth of such eminent persons. It sounds absurd or rather ludicrous, no doubt. But it has been the fact. That we have quite a few biographies after Independence, of the people of the past like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Padmanath Gohain Barua, Hem Chandra Barua, Kanaklal Barua and the like, are all because of the birth-centenary celebrations of these persons throughout the state under the auspices of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. That we have biographies of the persons like Maheswar Neog, Syed Abdul Malik, or Prasannal Choudhury and Sitanath Brahma Choudhury in this period, is not because these people deserve biographies, though they really do for their importance; but because they were elected Presidents of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. However, this is only a general observation; and there have been good biographies, not written with such extrinsic demands or topical interest alone, but with an inner urge as well, in this Age, too, as before Independence.

But in order to get good biographies of higher order still, more and more biographers with requisite talent and aptitude hinted above, will have to come forward to this branch of literature, too. The Assamese society will also have to undergo a change in its attitude. It will have to abandon its traditional attitude of *guru*-worship and the Victorian attitude of hero-worship, at least when it is undue or blind. Our society, and the reading public for that matter, will have to imbibe the critical spirit, in order to arrive at the truth about a man. Only then our biographers will be encouraged to lay bare the real men before us in their biographies, so that we may derive true benefit from our study, instead of getting mere false inspiration with the examples of made up men.

Then because biography is also a part of history, in order to make Assamese biography rich in materials and accurate in information, we should not only have diligent biographers who

can collect materials untiringly, but also have more and more people in the society who know the value of preserving books, magazines, newspapers, documents, diaries and letters, either in personal possessions or in libraries and archives.

After providing a fertile soil for biography in such a society, we can, no doubt, hope for biographies and biographers of higher order in Assamese literature, too. The field of biography being what it has been till now, the few good biographies that we have had, must also be counted as some sort of achievement of our biographers.

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