CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Khasis have a strong cultural and philosophical tradition. They had a script and lived within the framework of their own culture from time immemorial. After they had lost the script, they passed on their traditional wisdom orally from generation to generation. Today, the ancient myths and legends can be seen as a storehouse of their concepts, thoughts and ideas.

Though there is a spurt of writings on various concepts of Khasi culture, a lot more needs to be done towards analysing the significance of the core concepts of the Khasi world view. It is in this spirit, that I have selected the topic “Ka Pyrthei (World) and Ka Meiramew (Mother Earth) in traditional Khasi thought”.

These two selected concepts are key to the whole array of the traditional Khasi thought. The other traditional Khasi concepts revolve around these two concepts. Unfortunately, these two concepts, ka Pyrthei and ka Meiramew have been presented and discussed by many authors in a very confused manner. This thesis gives a conceptual clarification of both the concepts and examines the relation between them.
This thesis deals with conceptual exploration and is an exposition of the concepts *ka Pyrthei* and *ka Meiramew* in the light of the thought system or world view of the Khasis. To do this, I need first to explore the etymological and dictionary meanings of the terms, *ka Pyrthei* and *ka Meiramew*.

The word 'ka' is an indicative article. When article 'ka' is asserted, it indicates that an object or thing spoken of belongs to the feminine gender. Its plural form is 'ki'. The article used for a male object or thing is 'u' in the Khasi language. The Khasis used article 'ka' in relation to the word 'Pyrthei' or World and the word 'Meiramew' which means Mother Earth. This shows that according to the Khasi culture and language, *ka Pyrthei* and *ka Meiramew* are conceived in the feminine gender.

In the present thesis, after exploring the etymological meaning of the two terms, I have attempted a conceptual exploration of *ka Pyrthei* and *ka Meiramew* in Chapter II. I have at first discussed the various ways in which the terms *ka Pyrthei* and *ka Meiramew* have been used in Khasi literature. Going by the dictionary meaning, the term *ka Pyrthei* (World) stands for one of the planets while the term *ka Meiramew* (Mother Earth) refers more specifically to the geological aspect. Let me attempt a clarification of this.
The Khasis believe that it is God who created *ka Pyrthei* out of the atomic elements that existed in Him. They also believe that there is nothing in this *Pyrthei* which precedes the existence of God. To the Khasis the word *Pyrthei* has more than one meaning. At least there are two *Pyrtheis* in the traditional Khasi thought. First, there is an empirical world or phenomenal world which is known as *ka Pyrthei shongbasas* which means the spatio-temporal world. Second, there is another *Pyrthei* which is not physical but metaphysical. It is called *ka iing U Blei* which means the House of God. The relation between *U Blei* and *ka Meiramew* I have attempted to analyze on the pattern set by Spinoza's distinction between the *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.

Spinoza had a unique conception of God and creation. This is so because Spinoza identifies God with the whole cosmos. He holds the view that nothing can really exist apart from God. To him, God is like a universal substance which permeates everything in the world. He goes to the extent of identifying God with nature. To him, Nature has two aspects — *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*.

An attempt is made in this thesis to show that there is a possibility of comparing the Khasi conception of *U Blei* with the *Natura naturans* and *ka Meiramew* with the *Natura naturata* of Spinoza. However, since for the Khasis,
"ka Meiramew" is not just the fruit bearing soil but also the goddess of the Earth. "ka Meiramew" could be conceived as both the *Natura naturans* and the *Nautra naturata*.

The third chapter entitled 'The concept of "ka Pyrthei"' concentrates specifically on the analysis of the Khasi conception of "ka Pyrthei". It is "ka Niam Khasi" (the Khasi religion) which gives us a substantive background to the thoughts and speculations regarding the concept of "ka Pyrthei". In the course of discussion, I have pointed out that the Khasis see "ka Pyrthei" (World) as an orderly system. It consists mainly of (i) "Ka Bneng" which means heaven or sky or the space above us, (ii) "Ka Meiramew" which is below the sky, and (iii) "Ka Hawhaw" which means the atmospheric region which is between "ka Bneng" and "ka Meiramew". In other words, the Khasi thinkers conceived "ka Pyrthei" as having two halves, namely, "ka Bneng" (heaven or space above) and "ka Meiramew". According to their tradition, the two halves were initially joined together by "u Sohpetbneng" (Navel of heaven) which was in the form of a bridge connected heaven and earth. This sacred bridge was known in Khasi language as "ka Jingkieng Ksiar" which means the golden ladder. But "u Sohpetbneng" was broken in the later stages. It was through the instrumentality of "u Sohpetbneng" that the human beings of the golden age could go to heaven and come down to earth and vice versa.
The very first of our ancestors, it is believed, came down from heaven to live in this empirical world. It is for this reason that they regard heaven (*ka Bneng*) as the original home of man. The Khasis do not draw a sharp distinction between this empirical world and the world beyond. They called this empirical world *ka lingshongbasa* which means a spatio-temporal world which falls within our sense experience. It is mutable and changing, yet it exhibits certain order. The world beyond is viewed simply as the metaphysical world because our senses cannot experience it. But man as a spiritual being can think of it. The Khasis called the world beyond, *ka ling U Blei* which means the House of God. To them, the world beyond is a continuity of the empirical world.

In this chapter, I also try and compare Ramanuja's conception of God and creation to the Khasi conception of *U Blei* and creation. The Khasis, like Ramanuja, see the relation between *U Blei* and *ka Pyrthei* as the creator-created type of relationship. Let me quote an actual prayer addressed by a Khasi man to *U Blei*, which is the metaphysical entity.

*Ah Blei* Lord the creator of Heaven and Earth,
The giver of all things, structure and form,
Health, wealth and wisdom and conquest,
The protection from any danger and disgrace,
All in all mighty Lord, we bestow ourselves upon
Thy good care,
All together we thank thee.³

They see *ka Pyrthei* as a dependent entity which has no independent existence apart from God. Like Ramanuja the Khasis hold the view that *ka Pyrthei* is real. They emphasize on the notion of sacredness of *ka Pyrthei*. To Ramanuja what is not God is either the modes or attributes of God. To the Khasis, God is formless and can take any form. He is everywhere and at all times. This is one of the reasons that the traditional Khasis do not see the necessity to construct temples to worship God because God is permeating everything in this world. Again, according to the Khasis, this phenomenal world is purposive. This world is an instrument which God created to manifest Himself. It has been created to fulfill the eternal plan of God. Man must earn righteousness by living righteously in his earthly existence.

In this chapter, an attempt has also been made to criticize those writers who have portrayed the ancient Khasis as having no conception of the sacred. It is the Khasi Religion (*ka Niam Khasi*) which records the Khasi tribal wisdom in the form of myths, legends, songs, rituals, etc., and helps us to know the Khasi conception of life and its meaning. Prior to the arrival of Christianity in Khasi
Hills, it was Khasi religion which preserved the traditional wisdom of the ancient Khasis.

The fourth chapter is devoted to expounding the concept of *ka Meiramew* as mother Earth. The Khasis viewed *ka Meiramew* as the totality of the cosmic order. The earthly beings, I point out, can exist precisely because *ka Meiramew* exists. In this chapter, I try to refer to the three Khasi myths, namely, (i) *U Sohpethnen* which means the navel of heaven, (ii) The Diengiei Peak myth, and (iii) The *Krem Lamet Latang* myth. These three myths show that *ka Meiramew* (Mother Earth) is a living entity which has real existence. *Ka Meiramew* is the first product of creation. It co-exists with *U Blei*. In a sense it serves as a link between the visible world and the invisible world. It has a dual nature because it has a material as well as an immaterial aspect.

An attempt is made in this chapter to show that *ka Meiramew* performed various functions like giving birth to sacred forces like the Sun, Moon, Earth, Water, Fire, etc. and thus to serve as the universal Mother who feeds, nurtures and protects humans and non-humans. She patiently endures our reckless manipulation of her sacred body. Hence, *ka Meiramew* is a concept which connotes different things in different situations. It is pregnant with lot of meanings (Refer Chapter II). May be for this reason
different scholars give different views regarding the meaning of *ka Meiramew*. It is widely understood as the material principle, the material cause, the ultimate material principle, the birth-giver, the nourisher and goddess of the Earth itself.

In this connection, a conscious attempt has been made to compare the concept of *ka Meiramew* with that of *Prakrti* in the *Samkhya* system of Indian philosophy. A brief account of the relation between *Prakrti* and *Purusa*, their mutual interaction and the *Samkhya* theory of evolution is given. This has been made necessary because in this chapter I have highlighted the relation between *ka Meiramew* with the male principle namely, *u Basa* in the light of the relation between *Prakrti* and *Purusa*.

On the authority of tradition the Khasis advocate the eternal and absolutely independent existence of the male principle called *U Basa*. As the legendary accounts state *U Basa* and *Ka Meiramew* cohabitate and produce the empirical world. Referring to their union as a divine marriage, the Khasi thinkers reiterate the independence of *U Basa* on lines similar to that of the Samkhya conception of *Purusa*. However, I have tried to argue that unlike the *Samkhya Purusa*, *U Basa* is dynamic and changeable.

The fourth chapter ends with a description of what to my mind appears as the differences between the concept of
Prakrti and Ka Meiramew. Here again, though Ka Meiramew like Prakrti is viewed as (a) female, (b) active, (c) ultimately real, (d) all pervasive and (e) material cause of the world, she is regarded unlike Prakrti as conscious, as goddess and as coexisting with God, but functioning dependently.

As pointed out earlier, the Khasis see man (u briew) as created by U Blei having initially lived with U Blei in heaven. He is viewed as endowed with a body (ka met) and a soul (ka mynsiem). He is the creature who possesses ka rnegiew which means the rational power which adds personality and dignity to him.

In the conclusion, I re-emphasize the point that man with his fellow creatures, including animals should live together on the lap of ka Meiramew. U Blei does not expect man to conquer or subdue mother earth but to love and have mutual relation with it. Mother Earth feeds man like a mother feeding her child. Man is not at all a master of mother earth. He should perform all his actions in accordance with the natural Laws. He should not destroy the natural environment that sustains him. U Blei expects man to fulfill the divine plans in the world.

In the traditional Khasi thought, the concepts U Blei and Kyntang (sacred) match closely. Most of the Khasi villages have sacred forests called ki khlaw kyntang. They
are regarded as special dwelling places of God (U Blei) or gods (ki blei) who will protect and bless the villagers. These forests are also a reminder to man of U Blei's sustaining and unifying power.

*Ka Niam Khasi* teaches that only *U Blei* has absolute sovereignty over all creatures including human beings. Man has no dominion over his own life and non-human life. In other words, man cannot act as the viceroy of God over the planet. He has no right to take his own life or the life of his fellowmen. Man can kill the animals just to meet his basic needs and no more.

Most of the present day Khasis have been converted to Christianity. They accept Christ as the Redeemer, the Son of God. In other words, Christ is the only link between man and God, the Father. Consequently, the Christian-Khasis do not equate either *ka Pyrthei* or *ka Meiramew* with the sacred/Christ. Their status as goddesses gets reduced, leaving man free to exploit nature as and when he likes to. He has been indulging in large scale destruction of his natural habitat *ka ramew* (earth). The modern Khasi man by his reckless actions has polluted *ka ramew, ka um* (water) etc., whose purity is an essential condition for sustaining every form of life living on the epidermis of the earth.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Khasi community is said to be of Austro-Asiatic origin. According to the views of some authors, the Khasis came into Assam either from Burma or from the North through Sylhet. In the course of time they were driven back into the present hill areas of Meghalaya by a flood in some distant past.

2. The Khasis believe that they had received the script from God and lost it in the course of time.
