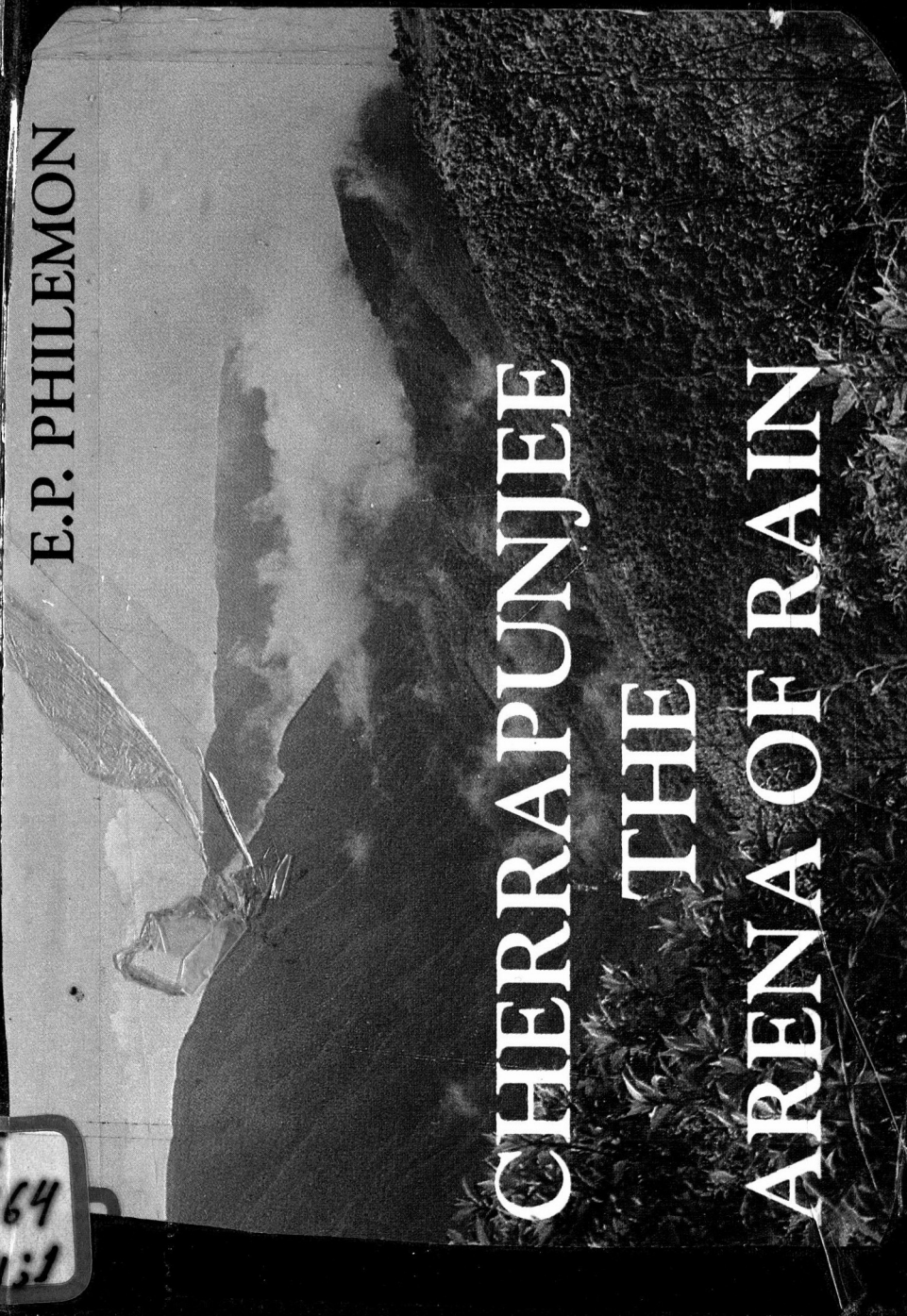


E.P. PHILEMON



CHERRAPUNJEE
THE
ARENA OF RAIN

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OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

- * Shillong Today (1984, 1985 & 1989)
- * Educational Records Management (1988)
- * Glimpses of Meghalaya (1981)

FORTH COMING

- * The Images of North East India.

CHERRAPUNJEE : THE ARENA OF RAIN

CHERRAPUNJEE : THE ARENA OF RAIN

A History and Guide to Sohra & Shillong.



E.P. Philemon



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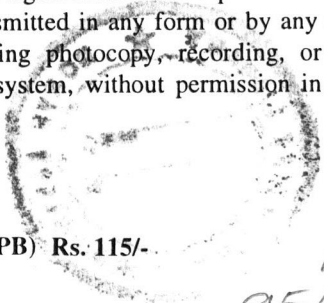
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Cherrapunjee : The Arena of Rain

First Edition 1995

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Dedicated
to my
Late Uncles
John David Martin Philemon
and
Samuel David Philemon
and my
Late Brothers-In-Law
Leslie John Mason
and
Ronald Solomon

Preface

It was my long-felt desire to present a book on Cherrapunjee (Sohra), which is perhaps going to be the first book of its kind in the country. In fact I had very little knowledge of Cherrapunjee and as to what had happened there since 1835. Yet, due to non-availability of books on Cherrapunjee, this book is prepared with the limited available resources. It will be of considerable help, both for visitors (complete ready made information) and for the students including research scholars, who would like to know more about Cherrapunjee and its historical significance. Cherrapunjee (Sohra) is still considered as the place of highest rainfall in the world. In spite of enormous rainfall, Cherrapunjee was made Headquarters and first capital of the British-India Government of the North East Region. The Roman Script was introduced for the first time and has since taken regular shape in the Khasi language which is spoken in the entire Khasi hills. Cherrapunjee is also the birth place of Christian religion and education in this region. No doubt, Christianity and Educational Institutions have played a major role in changing the life-style of the Khasi people.

Most of the people in other parts of the country, in fact, are not aware of the correct location of Cherrapunjee (Sohra). They understand that Cherrapunjee is still in Assam. Therefore, a complete picture of the history of Cherrapunjee has been highlighted in this book. The original name, its meaning and the whereabouts of Cherrapunjee have been depicted in the first chapter. Attempts have been made to explain the reasons behind the selection as Headquarters of the then capital of the British East India Company. The introduction of Christianity, Education, and the Roman Script, replacing the Bengali language, gave an assurance to the British Rulers that this land was not only fertile but would win souls for Christ. The schools were, therefore, used as a media for spreading Christianity and appointing evangelists as teachers. In a very short period, Christianity made its home in this region and changed the life-style of the local inhabitants. It is correct to mention that Christianity has also played a vital role in the development of the culture of the Khasi tribe and in preservation of their traditions which has not at all disturbed the

life-style and customs of the Khasi people. The detailed information on rainfall has been delineated in the third chapter. A large deposit of coal, minerals, limestone, local produce etc., made Cherrapunjee a much more rich place and officials of the East India Company were diverted towards the export and import business of the Khasis. Khasi people were found involved in export trade business in the areas of Sylhet, Pandua, Comilla, Dacca and Calcutta.

The choice of Cherrapunjee, in fact, was made by David Scott, an Agent of the East India Company who had changed the land to the form of a little piece of England. He was much impressed by the natural beauty and good healthy climate of this place. This book on Cherrapunjee would be found rather incomplete if nothing is said about Shillong. Because of excessive rainfall, the capital of the British-India Government was shifted from Cherrapunjee to Shillong. Babu Jeebon Roy had played a major role in the selection of Shillong as capital. He made efforts to keep alive the original Khasi customs and culture. A few villages were brought together and named as Shillong. Gradually it became one of the loveliest hill stations and the Britishers called it 'The Scotland of the East' because of its striking similarity with the mountain scenery of the Scottish highlands.

As regards the origin of the Khasi people, they were found to be the oldest inhabitants which belonged to the Austro-Asiatic family. They were found settled in this country perhaps even before the arrival of Dravidians and Aryans. The life-style, customs and culture has been clearly highlighted in the eighth chapter. It is the unity and strength of the Khasi community whether they are Christians or not that has kept alive the Khasi culture, customs, way of life and the traditional festivals throughout the process of political change.

The author and publishers would be grateful to receive from the readers of this publication, details of any shortcomings, errors or omissions, that have crept in. Any suggestion(s) for further improvement of this publication would be gratefully acknowledged.

October 10, 1994

E.P. Philemon

Foreword

It is indeed a pleasure to go through Mr E.P. Philemon's book *Cherrapunjee : The Arena of Rain*. The author has very ably traced out the historical significance of Cherrapunjee (Sohra). He also gives a lucid account of the development of Sohra from a small village to the status of the headquarters of the Khasi State of Cherra (Sohra) and subsequently the headquarters of the British administration. The impact of British administration and Christianity on the people of Sohra in particular and the Khasis in general has been dealt with more objectively. In addition, information on rainfall, mineral deposits, trade and commerce give one an insight to the natural wealth and people's activities in the area. The natural beauty and healthy climate of Sohra surrounded by roaring waterfalls, breath-taking deep gorges, and murmuring rivulets make it one of the loveliest hill stations frequently visited by tourists from outside. Until recently it was the wettest place on earth surpassed presently by Mawsynram in the same belt, and Waialeale in Hawaii. The Nohkalikai Falls near Sohra is the fourth tallest in the world. Apart from its cultural heritage Sohra is also known as the birth place of Christianity and Khasi literature in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Khasi language and literature is based on the Sohra dialect and the Roman script. A brief account in this book about Shillong which has replaced Sohra as the centre of administration, education, trade and commerce is also quite useful. Finally, the colour photographs depicting beautiful landscapes, lakes and waterfalls of the area are added attractions of the book. I hope this book will be a source of information to those who would like to explore for the first time the beauty of this hidden place and a reminder to others of the happy memories associated with their earlier visits of Sohra.

(B. PAKEM)

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The author is deeply indebted to Prof. J.B. Bhattacharjee, Vice Chancellor Assam University, Silchar and former Dean, School of Social Sciences, NEHU, Shillong for his keen interest, and for taking pains in going through this manuscript and for giving some useful suggestions. He is also grateful to Dr. L. Gassah, Reader, Department of Political Science, NEHU, Shillong, who had extended his kind help with adequate information on his subject.

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The author's special thanks go to Mr. I.D. Kashtriya of NEHU, Mr. V.S. Narasimhan, Mr. Manas R. Pattanaik, former Manager, Mr. V. Pardha Krishna, Tourist Officer, Government of India Tourist Office, Shillong, Rev. Father Mathew Vellankal, Donbosco Youth Centre, Shillong and M/s. K. Ghosal Bros, oldest photographers of Shillong, for rendering their help in one way or the other to enable him to present this book.

Selvina, his wife, Sophia, Sonia and Elba, his daughters, and Mr. Paul David Philemon, his father, are also invaluable as constant inspirers. It is not possible to mention the names of all the colleagues and friends, who have contributed their thought to this book, but his sincere gratitude is also extended to them.

The author also gratefully extends his acknowledgement to M/s. Spectrum Publications Guwahati, for publication of this book.

Lastly, the author extends his profound gratitude to Prof. B. Pakem, Vice-Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, who has agreed to write the Foreword of this book.

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I

Sohra — Churra — Cherra

India is a land of varied topography and natural beauty. To the lovers of nature and naturalists, the country offers every charm in the form of forests, mountains, valleys, cultivated plains or desert waste, as well as varied climate. No doubt, nature has been rather generous, to the State of Meghalaya.)

Meghalaya, the 21st State of the Indian Union, was declared a full-fledged State on 21st January, 1972 comprising the areas of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. The State is situated in the North Eastern Region of the country, and lies between 25.47° and 26.10° North Latitude and 89.45° and 92.47° East Longitude, which covers a total geographical area of 22,429 square kilometers, and forest area of 8784.85 square kilometers. It is bounded on the north by Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam, and on the east by the districts of Cachar and North Cachar Hills, also of Assam. On the south and west lie Bangladesh. The State has been divided into seven administrative districts, which are predominantly inhabited by three ancient tribes, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos shown in Table-I. The total population of the State as per 1991 census is estimated at 17,60,626 with a growth rate of 31.80 per cent during the decade. In spite of being a smaller state in terms of geographical area and population, Meghalaya is full of hills, valleys, rivers, plateaus, majestic waterfalls and silent lakes which enhance the beauty of the environment. The real charm is the two-fold-fascinating climate, Winter and the Monsoon, which can be enjoyed for the better part of the year. Shillong is the capital of Meghalaya State and the headquarters of the East Khasi Hills District.

(Sohra (Cherrapunjee) is fiftyone kilometers away from Shillong. It is situated in 25.15° North Latitude and 91.44° East Longitude and 1,330 meters above sea level. As per the Census of

Table I
District-wise Total Geographical Area

District	Headquarters	Geographical Area (Sq. Kms.)	Provisional Population (1991)
Jaintia Hills	Jowai	3819	2,19,186
West Garo Hills	Tura	3707	4,15,421
East Garo Hills	Williamnagar	2603	1,89,043
East Khasi Hills	Shillong	2818	5,07,160
West Khasi Hills	Nongstoin	5247	2,17,462
Ri-Bhoi	Nongpoh	2378	62,354
South Garo Hills	Baghmara	1857	1,50,000

India, 1991, the total population of Sohra is estimated at 7,833 (Male population 3,953 and female population 3,880). It is surrounded by roaring waterfalls, breath-taking deep gorges and lively rivulets. No other place in the country can offer such a variety: the monumental Nohsngithiang Fall (Mawsmal Fall) at Mawsmal, the epic Dain-thlen Fall, the romantic Nohkalikai Fall (fourth tallest fall in the world) and smaller ones down every slope. Kynrem Fall can also be seen on the Mawsmal-Shella road. The maximum temperature of 23° celsius in the month of June and minimum of 7.6° celsius in the month of January has been recorded at Sohra (Cherrapunjee). The monsoon begins in the month of April-May and continues till the end of October.

'Meghalaya' means 'the Abode of Clouds', Sohra (Cherrapunjee) justifies the significance of the name ('Megh' means 'Cloud' and 'alay' means 'an Abode' or 'a dwelling place'). Mawsynram near Sohra, is the wettest place on Earth. Sohra (Cherrapunjee) is one of the leading rain receiving places in the world. This is mainly due to its proximity to the towering Meghalaya plateau against which the moisture laden south-west monsoons strike, resulting in heavy rainfall. In 1861, the rainfall recorded was 22,987 millimetres (905 inches), of which 9,296 millimetres (366 inches) was in the month of July alone. The maximum rainfall for a single day was, however, recorded in 1876,

when 1,041 millimetres (41 inches) of rain fell in 24 hours.¹ Therefore, Sohra is known as the place that receives the world's heaviest rainfall. The epicentre of the heaviest rainfall has now moved a few kilometers away to Mawsynram, but Sohra is still known by its old pride.)

Before the arrival of the British in the country, Cherrapunjee was locally known as 'SOHRA'. Sohra was one of the twentyfive States of the Khasi Hills. With the establishment of the Khasi Hills Political Agency, the British occupied a portion of Sohra, and termed it as the 'Cherrapunjee Station', which functioned as the official Headquarters of the British Raj, for the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in 1835. Now Sohra (Cherrapunjee) is a part of the East Hills District within Meghalaya.

The original name of Cherrapunjee was no doubt 'SOHRA', which had been mis-pronounced or mis-sounded as 'CHURRA', in those days by the Britishers just before the establishment of the British rule in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It is presumed that the British people, found it difficult in getting the correct pronunciation of the word 'SOHRA'. There is also a possibility that the Britishers could only catch the exact alphabet as 'CHU' instead of 'SOH'. It appears that the Britishers could not get the correct pronunciation from the mouth of the local inhabitants of the War Area. Although local inhabitants did pronounce as 'SOH', the Britishers heard it as 'CHU'. Sir Hooker wrote: 'No rhododendron grows at Churra....., but several species occur a little further north'.² It was also noticed that even 'SHELLA' was mispronounced by the Britishers as 'CHEYLA'.³ It is very clear that the pronunciation of the local inhabitants was heard by the Britishers in such a way that the alphabet sounded as 'SOH' of 'SHE' appeared like as 'CHU' or 'CHE' instead of 'SOH' or 'SHE'.

Then comes the word 'PUNJEE/PUNJI', which was suffixed to the word 'CHERRA'. It was noticed that Cherrapunjee was spoken by two separate words as 'CHURRA PUNJEE'.⁴ In fact, the word 'PUNJEE' means as per the Hindi dictionary 'CAPITAL' or 'WEALTH'.

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1. Allen, B.C. ; *Gazetteer of Khasi & Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Lushai Hills*, Delhi, 1900 (reprinted in 1980), p. 30.
 2. Chowdhury, J.N ; *The Khasi Canvas*, Shillong, 1978, p. 25.
 3. Oldham, Thomas ; *Geology, Meteorology & Ethnology of Meghalaya* (on the Geological Structure of Part of the Khasi Hills, 1854), Delhi, 1984, p. 34.
 4. Pemberton, R.B ; *The Eastern Frontier of India*, Delhi, 1835, p. 247.

Since Sohra was situated close to the plains of Sylhet, the dialect of Sohra and numerous words of the Sylhet dialect of Bengali got themselves acclimatised through trade and other diverse occasions. It is very clear that the Bengali language left its indelible mark in the Khasi Hills.⁵ 'Punjee' meaning 'Village' in the Bengali language also sometimes used for 'Wealth'. It is presumed that most of the Bengali traders might have informed the Britishers regarding the hidden wealth of Churra Punjee. Twentyfive villages were then dependant upon Churra, whose total population was estimated at about 30,000 souls. On the other hand the village named 'Soopar Poonjee' (Sohbar Poonjee), situated between Churra and the plains, was also a rich village. The export trade was in the hands of the Bengalis and most of them were natives of Sylhet, who frequently visited the local markets.⁶ Sohra (Cherrapunjee) was one of the business centres in those days, besides Shillong and Jowai. The Khasis were perhaps the most trade-minded people even before the advent of the British rule and they employed Bengali accountants to keep their business records. The principal articles exported were coal, lime, iron, potato, orange, honey, bee's wax, betel-nut, betel-leaf, bay-leaf, broomstick, spices, etc., and all those products were exported by boat along the stream upto Sylhet, Dacca and Calcutta.⁷ From the mineral point of view, coal and limestone were found at Cherra in abundance.⁸ Hooker mentioned that potatoes and oranges were exported in great quantities. From these evidences, it becomes very clear that the word 'PUNJEE' was contributed by the Bengalis, and it was suffixed with the word 'CHURRA' in view of the hidden wealth of the place. As regards the word 'CHERRAPUNJEE', it was an improved version of the two words 'CHURRA' and 'PUNJEE', most probably just in or before the year 1835, when Cherrapunjee was declared as official Headquarters of the British Raj. /

Guwahati, in Assam, is an entry point to the State of Meghalaya. In the early years of the British rule, a fine bullock-cart road ran through the district from Guwahati to Sohra (Cherrapunjee). Earlier settlements like Nongkhlaw, Mairang, Mawphlang, Sohra, Mawblang and Thereaghat were linked with

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5. Dutta, P.N.; "Relations of the Khasis and Jaintias with their Southern Neighbours Till the British Intervention", *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Shillong, 1980, p. 82.
 6. Pemberton, R.B ; op. cit., pp. 238-239.
 7. Tariat, J.E ; *Tirot Sing*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 6.
 8. Zimba, D.T ; *Geography of Meghalaya*, Shillong, 1977, p. 170.

Guwahati and Sylhet. This road, which covered a total distance of two hundred and eight kilometers, lost its importance after the Guwahati-Shillong road was completed.⁹ Now it is an excellent metalled road, covering a distance of one hundred and fiftyone kilometers between Guwahati and Sohra (Cherrapunjee).

The journey between Guwahati and Shillong either by bus or by taxi, takes a minimum of three hours and covers one hundred kilometers (Table — II), which can be found to be very exhilarating. One may not feel tiresome at all, provided he/she enjoys the topography of the State beginning from Jorabat itself. Green vegetation, gentle swelling hills, long and winding roads makes the journey refreshing. From Khanapara and then Burnihat, on the way to Nongpoh, the road appears to be like a snake, running faster ahead by the side of green paddy fields. One may sometimes feel that the road is going inside a forest. A refreshing cup of tea at Nongpoh, a mid-way station, between Guwahati and Shillong, relieves the tedium (if any!) of the long drive. After taking rest for fifteen or twenty minutes the journey starts again towards Shillong. From Nongpoh onwards, one finds the environment fresh and breath-taking, specially after crossing Umsning (Naya Bunglow). Thereafter, at the Umiam Lake at Umiam (Barapani), covering an area of about five square kilometers, the marvellous scenery around the Lake, and the beauty of the Lake itself, inspires a person to stop his/her journey to admire the beauty of nature. At a short distance one reaches Mawlai, which is hardly five kilometers away from Shillong city centre. The outskirt area of Mawlai first welcomes all persons visiting Meghalaya before they enter into a big busy cosmopolitan city, well known as the 'Scotland of the East'.

Even if visitors reach Shillong in the evening whether he/she is coming either by air or by train via Guwahati or by road, one can find good accommodation according to his/her budget in any hotel, guest house or rest house for a day's rest. Most of the big or small hotels are situated in and around Police Bazar area, near the Meghalaya State Transport Bus Station. Local taxis, city buses, etc., ply in and around the city for the whole day till 9 p.m. Between Guwahati and Sohra (Cherrapunjee) the long journey can be covered even in one day in case the person is having his/her own vehicle.

9. Gopalakrishnan, R ; *Geography of Meghalaya*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 47.

Once a person reaches Shillong, Sohra (Cherrapunjee) becomes always a top priority in his/her list of visiting places e.g.

Table II

Road Distance in Kilometers Between Guwahati and Shillong

Distance (Kilometers)	Reaching Destination	Difference in Kilometers	Altitude in Meters ¹⁰
00	Guwahati	00	90
05	Dispur	05	90
25	Burnihat	20	100
36	Umling	11	264
48	Nongpoh	12	524
66	Umran Bridge	18	676
71	Umsning	05	800
83	Umiam Lake	12	950
95	Mawlai	12	1380
100	Shillong	05	1500

Jowai, Tura, Dawki, Balat and Mawsynram. Mawsynram is now receiving more rainfall than Sohra, but Sohra has a rich historical heritage, and some significance for being the first British outpost in the north eastern region of the country. Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation now operates regular conducted tours by luxury coaches from morning 8 O'clock daily. In addition to this, Meghalaya State Transport buses ply twice in a day upto Shella via Sohra (Cherrapunjee), available from the Bus Stand adjacent to the Anjalee Cinema Hall in the Cantonment Area. Local taxis and bazar buses are also available.

(The morning time can be the most suitable time to start the journey. Sohra is about fifty two kilometers from Shillong as shown in Table-III. It takes around two hours to reach Sohra. The drive through this road is an unforgettable experience for a person visiting Sohra as the terrain through which the road passes is extremely picturesque. It is a trip in which every kilometer offers a new,

10. Philemon, E.P ; *Glimpses of Meghalaya*, Shillong, 1991, p. 4.

fascinating mountainscape. On reaching Upper Shillong, one finds the beautiful Elephant Falls on the Umdiangpun stream, a half kilometer away from the main road. The Falls look more beautiful during the months from May to September. One can find, if one visits during the months of December and January, 'hoar-frost' in the areas of Upper Shillong, on the paddy fields of Myllem area on the way to Umtyngngar. Earlier the check gate was situated at Myllem, which has been shifted to Umtyngngar. On reaching Umtyngngar gate, a midway on the Shillong-Sohra road, one finds the road branches in two directions. Proceeding on the left one can reach Dawki, (Bangladesh border town) and the one on the right side, leads to Sohra (Cherrapunjee). The road on the way to Sohra, just beyond Dympep village after passing a curve, has always been a fascinating sight and the scenery on the road is breathtaking. After crossing the Mawjrong, one finds Dympep village on the hill (height, 1840 meters), one kilometer away from the main road between Mawjrong and Mawkdok Bridge. After crossing the Mawkdok (Dympep)- Umdiangpoh, on the road leading to Sohra , specially during the spring season, the air is heavily scented with the fragrance of orange blooms. Just before reaching Sohra (Cherrapunjee), one can find the steep slopes, narrow gorges and "V" shaped valleys. The landscape of this area is characterised by forests interspersed by tiny isolated hamlets.¹¹ Sohra itself is a grassy, marshy plateau with streams and pools on every side, and huge masses of limestone covered with ferns and mosses. On reaching Sohra, there is the Rama Krishna Mission Monastery to welcome the visitor(s) ; the building is very clearly visible even from a distance as an indication that the person has already reached Sohra.

Sohra (Cherrapunjee) has a unique and breathtaking combination of nature in the form of crystal clear streams, majestic waterfalls, stalactite and stalagmite caves, etc. While in Sohra one can see the Iew Sohra (Cherra Bazar), St. John Bosco's Shrine, and Ramakrishna Mission Monastery which are located in Upper Cherra and Cherra Theological College in the lower Cherra. Besides these places, one can see the Mawsmi Fall, Kynrem Fall, Umhein Fall, Lum Lawbah Cave, the erected Monument of Late David Scott and a panoramic view of Bangladesh, in the distance. Sohra has a few fascinating stone-gorges noted among which are 'Riat-Maw-Iew', 'Maw-Lai-Khlieh' and 'Riat-U-Shain'. Sohra has its natural fauns and varieties of wild orchids.

11. Gopalakrishnan, R ; op. cit., 1989, p. 48.

Table III
Road Distance in Kilometers Between Shillong and Sohra

Distance (kilometers)	Reaching Destination	Difference in Kilometers	* Altitude in Meters
00	Shillong	00	1500
11	Upper Shillong	11	1790
16	Myllem	05	1720
22	Umtyngngar	06	1700
26	Kyrdemkhla	04	1820
27	Mawjrong	01	1820
29	Mawkdok (Dympep)	02	1820
32	Umdiengpoh	03	1800
37	Ladmawphlang	05	1700
40	Sohrarim	03	1680
41	Mawmihthied	01	1660
43	Laitryngew	02	1660
50	Iew Sohra (Cherra Bazar)	07	1320
52	Sohra (Cherrapunjee)	02	1303

* Source : U Bah B. Dohkrut and Shri P. Ghosh of Shillong.