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## Rain, Rain, Come Again: Cherrapunji, the Rainiest Spot on Earth

In Cherrapunji, in the East Khasi Hills of the present Meghalaya State in India, the British established a hill station in 1831 where they could escape the tropical heat of the Indian plains. British officials were attracted by the cool climate—a result of the heaviest rainfall in the world—and soon made it the administrative headquarters of northeast India. So impressed were they with Cherrapunji that the agent to the government general was willing to exchange “a portion of the bold and sterile land [in the plains] for a slice of fertile land below [in Cherrapunji].” He immediately recommended a sanatorium be established to aid the recovery of European military men. But the Cherrapunji station had to be shifted to Shillong, since the area’s wetness threatened soldiers’ health and challenged efforts at imperial administration. The soils in Cherrapunji held very little moisture, so despite the precipitation drinking water was scarce. This paper investigates how climatic unruliness vexed British attempts to assert control while providing an opportunity for local people. Both substantially inherent in the place and imagined in the minds of imperial authorities, Cherrapunji’s “unruliness”—its enduring soggy—fundamentally shaped human decision making.

### The Making of Cherrapunji

Cherrapunji is a cluster of hilltop villages situated 51 kilometers from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. The earliest reference to the rains of Cherrapunji was made in 1827 by David Scott, who wrote: “We have had almost incessant rains and mists here since the 28<sup>th</sup> last [May 1827]. This is a great drawback on the climate of the place . . . The quantity of rain that falls here in April and May must be at least ten times as much as they have at Nongkhlaw.”<sup>1</sup> Scott’s estimates were corroborated by Dr. W. Cracroft, who began measuring rainfall in Cherrapunji in June 1832. He measured nearly 577 centimeters of rain in four months, making Cherrapunji one of the wettest places, if not *the* wettest place, on the globe. The *Imperial Gazetteer* in 1908 declared Cherrapunji the wettest spot in Asia, with an extraordinary annual rainfall average of 1,163

1 Scott to Lamb, 10 June 1827, cited in R. B. Pamberton, *Eastern Frontier of India* (Calcutta, 1835; rev. ed., Delhi: Mittal Publishers, 1979), 247.

centimeters. The cause of this heavy precipitation was clear: the Khasi Hills rose from the plains, halting the southwest monsoon that drove across the flooded territories of Eastern Bengal and Sylhet. The air, saturated with moisture, would rise, cool, and be precipitated as rain. It was this rain that attracted the British.

### **Rain's Oppressions and Disappearance**

The rainfall that attracted the British brought challenges as well as benefits. Catholic missionaries in the area reported:

Such heavy rains produce extreme dampness which penetrates everything, causes severe soil erosion and floods as the water rush down to the plains. Tables, chairs, benches etc. must be fixed with bolts. Otherwise they fall to pieces. Iron bolts cannot be used because they rust and become loose. Only wood and brass can be used. It is the same with nails. Shoe nails must be made of wood! Leather articles get mildewed and deteriorated. Books disintegrated and become discoloured. New books no longer new after a rainy season! Clothes, linen, bed sheets and blankets are always damp and have an unpleasant odour. One longs for sunshine in order to bring everything out into the open air to dry. Salt melts and medicines are spoiled. Flour and rice become lumpy unless they are cooled in air tight containers or kept in a heated room.<sup>2</sup>

Protestant missionaries faced similar difficulties. "Most of my time," noted one Welsh Presbyterian in 1841, "is occupied in saving our goods from being ruined by the rain. No sooner have we dried the contents of one box than we must open another to dry the contents of that and so on with all our belongings."<sup>3</sup> Even when it was not raining, Cherrapunji was almost always cloudy. Intervals between rains were occupied by deep fog, which shrouded the area in darkness. A lack of light and confinement indoors caused depression, and many resorted to drinking. Alcoholism became a major problem among Europeans living in Cherrapunji; prolonged depression led some to take their own lives.

2 Christopher Becker, *History of the Catholic Missions in North East India* (Shillong: Vandrame Missiological Institute, 1980), 201–2.

3 John Hughes Morris, *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission to the End of the Year 1904* (1910; repr., Delhi: Indus, 1996), 88.

Paradoxically, the ceaseless rains of Cherrapunji also left the region in want of drinking water. British officials tied this water scarcity to the soil's inability to retain moisture. One possible cause was topsoil erosion; early botanical reports by William Griffith as early as 1837 showed that there were very few trees. In 1850, the geologist Thomas Oldham posited that the Cherrapunji grasslands had developed gradually through natural processes. Over time, heavy rainfall had carried off the thin, loose layer of topsoil. In the early 1850s naturalist Joseph Dalton Hooker came to similar conclusions, asserting that the absence of forests in Cherrapunji was natural. Conditions had grown so difficult for Europeans by that time that the Cherrapunji station had long since been abandoned. In 1834, when the last British soldier left the hills, the Court of Directors lamented that "so much expense should have been incurred in the prosecution of an experiment which has so completely failed."<sup>4</sup>

If nineteenth-century "experts" had believed that the Cherrapunji landscape was completely natural, by the twentieth century it was widely recognized that humans had modified it in significant ways. Since antiquity, trees have been harvested across the region to produce charcoal for iron production. In addition, the local Khasi people had long practiced slash-and-burn agriculture among existing forest stands, barring a few hundred hectares that were preserved for religious reasons. But it was British corporations, such as the Peninsular and Oriental Company, which made the biggest mark in the shortest time. Coal, limestone, petroleum, and sandstone extraction and firewood collection led to dramatic landcover change. Combined, these pursuits decimated the remaining forest stands, causing soil erosion and converting much of Cherrapunji into unproductive wasteland. Over the course of the twentieth century, forest cover across the region was reduced by more than seven percent. Forests play a vital role in generating rainfall: in the absence of adequate tree cover less rain falls, and when it does fall the water runs quickly over the landscape, scouring the soil of valuable nutrients. From the 1940s there grew a lurking suspicion that annual rainfall in Cherrapunji was declining. There was an acute shortage of drinking water in the winter months despite heavy rainfall in the summer—a case of "water, water everywhere/nor any drop to drink."<sup>5</sup> Environmental scientists have begun to label Cherrapunji a "wet desert," where rainwater simply drains into the plains, leaving very little on the hilltops. A

4 David Reid Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1989), 50.

5 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: J & A Arch, 1798).

nearby village called Mawsynram (about 16 kilometers from Cherrapunji) was labeled the new recipient of the heaviest rainfall: from 1941 to 1979 its annual average rainfall was 1,186 centimeters, while Cherrapunji received only 1,153 centimeters. Another report suggested the highest rainfall to be in Waialeale on the Hawaiian Island of Kaua'i. Deforestation had clearly taken its toll, and so Cherrapunji's—and the Khasi people's—claim to fame had begun to dry up.

### **Conclusion**

Cherrapunji was a sleepy hilltop village in the remote northeastern frontier of India, discovered as a consequence of the colonial search for a cool place suitable for European sensibilities. In the course of their stay, the British discovered it to be the wettest place on Earth, but the rainfall proved to be too precarious to administer the region efficiently. The British abandoned Cherrapunji, escaping to the safety and serenity of Shillong, but the colonial presence lingered. British corporations removed Cherrapunji's mineral wealth and the trees that held it in place, leaving it a barren wasteland. It proved ruinous for a place whose geological and climatic patterns limited the types of plants that grew there. Eventually, European colonists, traders, miners, and speculators left Cherrapunji to the Khasi people, and the rain. Its barren land and exhausted mines left precipitation as the region's only resource. What had been a source of unruliness for British authorities created a sense of stability for the Khasi, who earned a living from the visitors who came to see the rain. But with rumors of dwindling rainfall and growing competition among other high-rainfall locations, this source of livelihood became threatened. Alas, all they could do was hope and pray for the rains to remain.

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