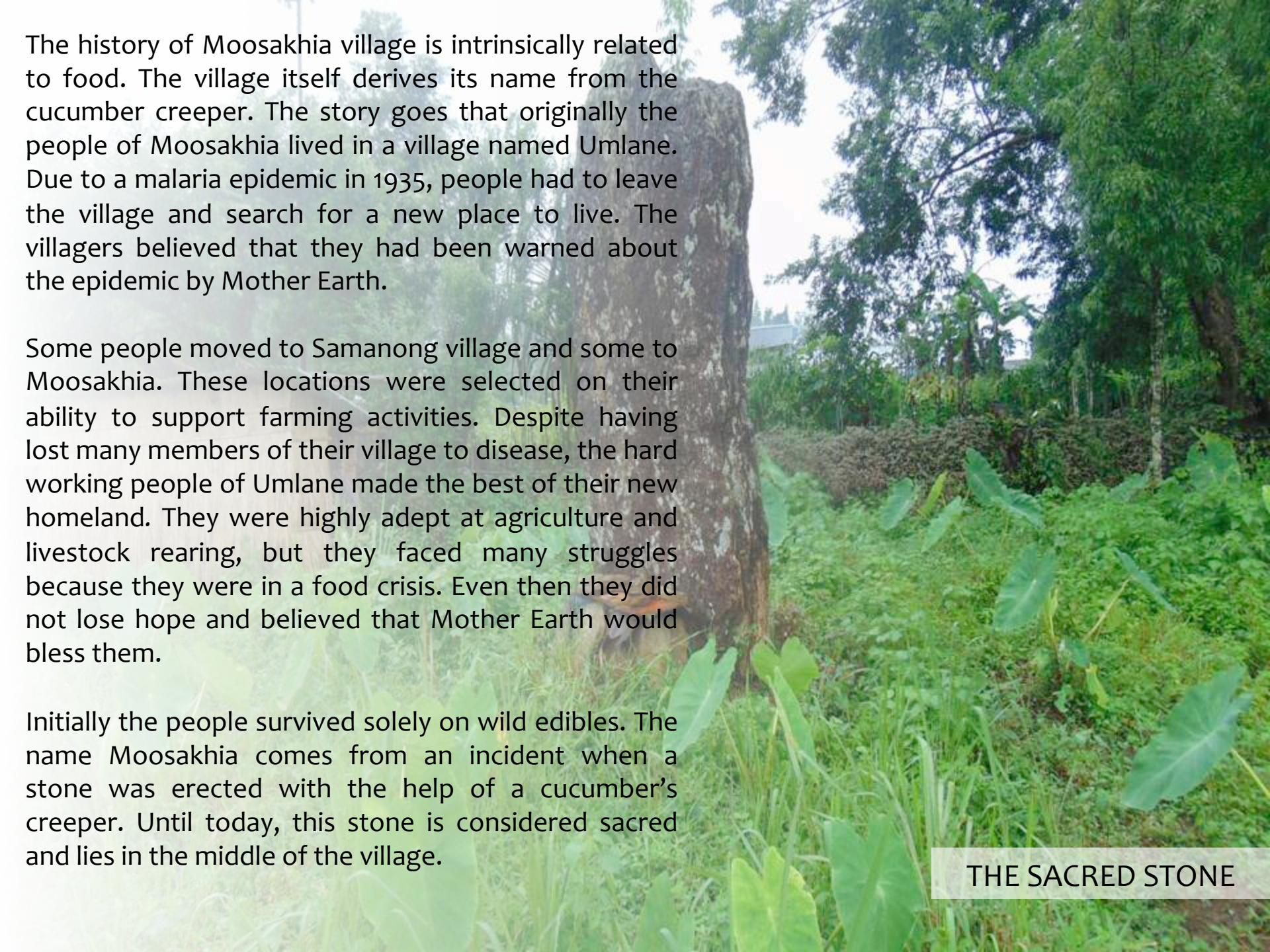


MOOSAKHIA: Pride in Traditions

A photograph of a rural landscape in Moosakhia, India, shrouded in mist. A dirt road curves through the scene, bordered by a traditional stone wall. In the background, a utility pole stands amidst dense, foggy vegetation and hills.

Text: Amrita Ravimohan

Photographs: Amrita Ravimohan/Pius Ranee/NESFAS

A large, dark, rectangular stone stands prominently in the center of a lush green field. The stone is weathered and has a rough texture. In the background, there are several tall trees with dense green foliage. The foreground is filled with various green plants, including some with large, heart-shaped leaves. The overall scene is a natural, rural setting.

The history of Moosakhia village is intrinsically related to food. The village itself derives its name from the cucumber creeper. The story goes that originally the people of Moosakhia lived in a village named Umlane. Due to a malaria epidemic in 1935, people had to leave the village and search for a new place to live. The villagers believed that they had been warned about the epidemic by Mother Earth.

Some people moved to Samanong village and some to Moosakhia. These locations were selected on their ability to support farming activities. Despite having lost many members of their village to disease, the hard working people of Umlane made the best of their new homeland. They were highly adept at agriculture and livestock rearing, but they faced many struggles because they were in a food crisis. Even then they did not lose hope and believed that Mother Earth would bless them.

Initially the people survived solely on wild edibles. The name Moosakhia comes from an incident when a stone was erected with the help of a cucumber's creeper. Until today, this stone is considered sacred and lies in the middle of the village.

THE SACRED STONE

From seven households, Moosakhia has grown to 94 households. The community maintains a spiritual connection with nature through a sacred grove that lies close to their village. The sacred grove is viewed as a guardian and people perform ritual ceremonies here every year. No one is allowed to cut down trees from this grove or to destroy the forest. The grove is managed by three clans, the Paksang, Bareh and Kasar.

Today the village conducts many farming related activities such as agriculture, fishing and beekeeping. Although farmers have moved towards growing broom grass as a cash crop, they still maintain pride in their local millet and six varieties of rice, native pig species and bees. This pride has been bolstered by local efforts and NESFAS programs. The village now has one of the biggest school gardens, growing cabbage, beets, carrots and many other crops. These vegetables are added to the government-sponsored midday meals served to the school children.

Pius, one of the associates at NESFAS, recounts how when he first started working in the village, he was served biscuits with tea by the villagers. Today, they proudly serve *puthoro* and *pusla* (traditional rice-based snacks) with red tea to all visitors. It is a symbol of their renewed pride in what is intrinsically theirs and the confidence to showcase it to the wider world.



THE SCHOOL GARDEN

Villagers believe that the core idea of *ka bha ka miat* (happiness and wellbeing) is what brings the village peace and harmony as a whole. “This is possible when there is unity and common understanding within the village,” one villager offered – what they call the “we feeling”. This feeling is not limited to human beings but includes livestock too; “Cows and goats became my close friends and they make me happy all the time,” says another villager.



RAINY DAY IN THE VILLAGE



VILLAGER IN TRADITIONAL RAIN GEAR

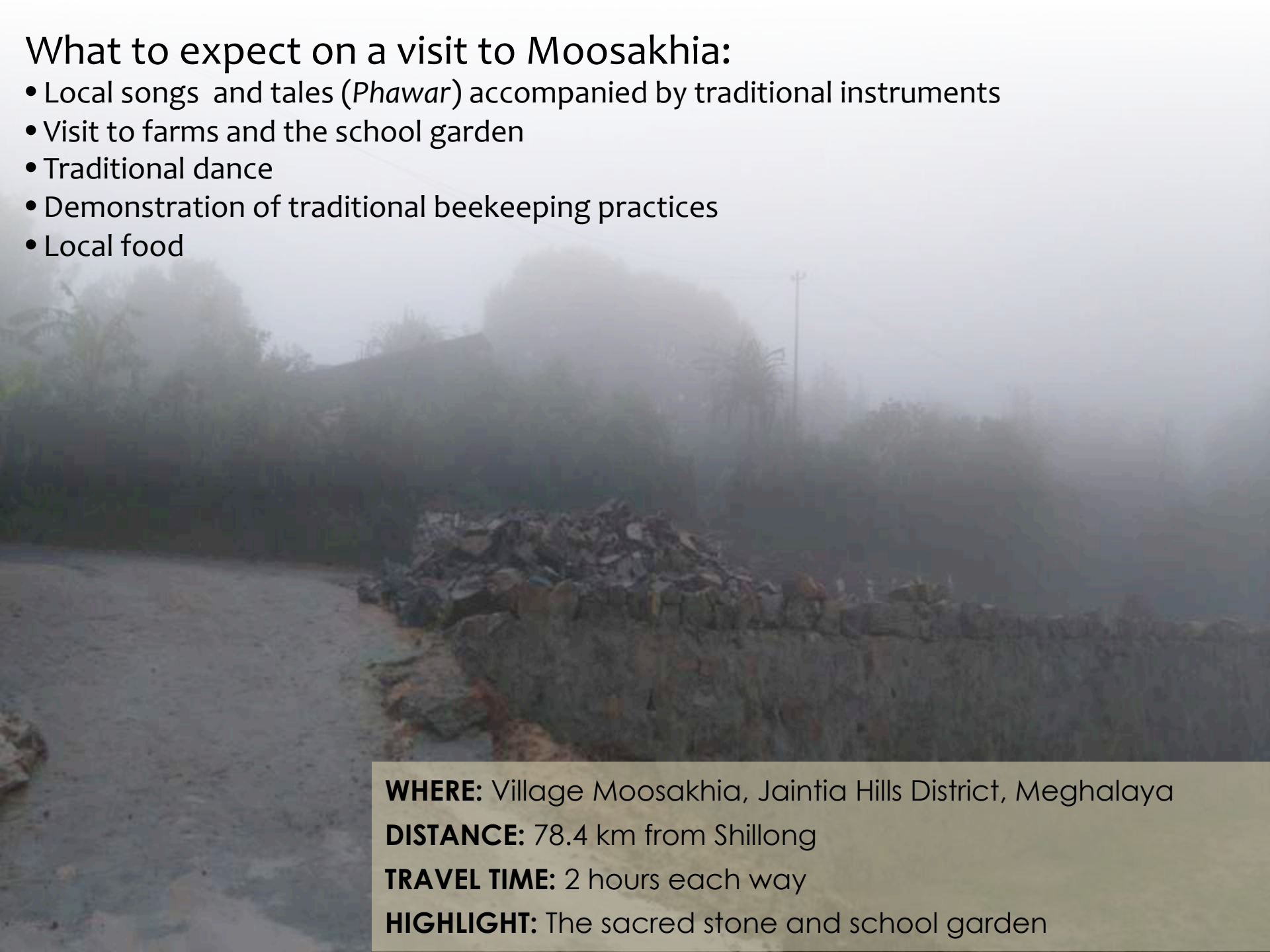
The villagers share a close relationship with nature; it affects every aspect of their life from predicting rain (by studying the cycles of the moon) to calculating the amount of rainfall received (by studying river levels relative to markings on rock surfaces). They believe “Our soil is the best, even the water that we drink, our water tastes better than other’s. The air coming from various hills and mountains is fresh and clean. Even in terms of farming, as we are used to using our own tools, our own soil and style of farming. We feel comfortable using our own.” They truly feel they are a blessed people, from which stems pride in their identity and culture. The results are seen in their efforts to keep the village clean and their hospitable nature. On asking one of the village elders what lessons he would pass to the next generation, he said, “The most important thing that I want my children to always keep in mind is to never forget farming.” Wise words indeed.



MAIN VILLAGE STREET

What to expect on a visit to Moosakhia:

- Local songs and tales (*Phawar*) accompanied by traditional instruments
- Visit to farms and the school garden
- Traditional dance
- Demonstration of traditional beekeeping practices
- Local food

A photograph of a misty, foggy landscape. In the foreground, there is a stone wall made of large, dark rocks. To the left, a dirt road or path leads into the distance. The background is heavily obscured by thick fog, with some trees and a utility pole visible in the distance.

WHERE: Village Moosakhia, Jaintia Hills District, Meghalaya

DISTANCE: 78.4 km from Shillong

TRAVEL TIME: 2 hours each way

HIGHLIGHT: The sacred stone and school garden