

## A disappearing slice of England in an Indian forest

**SOURCE: Deccan Chronicle**



Kathelene Hourigan, a 64-year-old Anglo Indian resident of McCluskieganj poses for a photograph in front of her house - AFP

As India inched towards independence, hundreds of mixed-race Anglo-Indians feared for their future and retreated to a self-styled homeland in a thickly forested part of the country.

Ernest McCluskie, an Indian of Scottish descent established McCluskieganj in what is now the eastern state of Jharkhand, hoping to attract Anglo-

Indians anxious about the impending demise of the British empire.

Nearly 80 years on, the few colonial bungalows still standing are in disrepair, the local economy survives on the back of a single school, and McCluskieganj's ageing residents say the "chhotta England" (little England) they grew up in has vanished forever.

Anglo-Indians prospered under British rule with access to good jobs in the railways, armed forces or as customs officers. They spoke English fluently, wore Western-style clothes, ate kedgeree and pudding and practised Christianity, much like the country's colonial rulers, who reserved jobs for them in several branches of government until 1919. There was still a degree of discrimination, with British officials working in India tending to look down on Anglo-Indian colleagues. Members of the community socialised at their own clubs, since they were usually not admitted into the clubs frequented by colonial officers.

Some high-profile Anglo-Indians went to great lengths to conceal their identity, as in the case of 1930s Hollywood star Merle Oberon, who claimed to be Tasmanian, believing that news of her Indian roots would derail her career.

The popular Hollywood film "Bhowani Junction" told the story of an Anglo-Indian army officer -- played by the sultry Ava Gardner -- and her conflicted ties to India and Britain. This was the climate in which many Anglo-Indians came to McCluskieganj. 66-year-old Noel Gordon's family arrived here in 1946, one year before independence. "Everyone in India was going on about 'gora ko hatao' (remove the white people). This place felt safe at a time when people were scared and afraid for their security," he told AFP. "They were worried that they would lose all the comforts they were used to enjoying under the British Raj," he added. Today the ruins of abandoned colonial homes dot McCluskieganj's landscape. Dirt roads lead to broken-down bungalows with missing doors and windows. Pieces of brick and terracotta litter floors stained with bird droppings. The odd ceramic toilet or stone fireplace sits intact, flanked by crumbling cobweb-laden walls.

Shivsharan Mahto, the caretaker at a surviving bungalow, told AFP the original Anglo-Indian owners left decades ago and sold the place to a Hindu family living in the state capital Ranchi. In the years after Indian independence, tens of thousands of Anglo-Indians sold their homes in Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and other cities, packed up their belongings and moved overseas, believing that their future lay there. In the 1960s, McCluskieganj also saw hundreds leave for economic reasons, and the community dwindled to just a few families. But in the early days of the settlement, the place was buzzing with activity, according to retiree Gordon. "In the 1940s and 50s McCluskieganj was more developed than Ranchi. There were record stores, cosmetics shops, we had a bakery, a butchery, a cobbler," he said. "We would go on picnics and shoots, hunt wild boar and deer. The arms magistrate used to come here from Ranchi to renew our gun

licenses because there were so many guns in McCluskieganj!" "It was a very sociable place in those days," Judy Mendonca, president of the town's now tiny Anglo-Indian Society confirmed. "We would hold dances, stage plays, organise fancy dress parties, play housie (bingo)," she said.

But the local economy failed to match the vibrancy of the social life. Few Anglo-Indians had ever farmed before, and yet in McCluskieganj most of them poured their savings into cultivation since life there presented few other options. They knew little about agriculture and their efforts resulted in poor harvests and low earnings. Slowly the settlers, like their compatriots across India, left for greener pastures -- often in Britain, Australia and Canada. "We used to have more than 200 families, now we have only about eight or 10 families left," Mendonca said. Today the town's economy rests on the reputation of a local school, Don Bosco Academy, which opened 14 years ago. Thanks to the school, several local residents have converted part of their homes to hostels for the thousand-odd students who come here from neighbouring states. Even so, the town remains underdeveloped. The roads -- several of which are unpaved -- have no street lighting, and access to electricity is intermittent. Some Anglo-Indians stay on because they have few, if any alternatives open to them, like 61-year-old Kitty Texeira, who sells fruit every day at the railway station.

"Things were much better before. We had thick forests and streams flowing. It was like a mini England," said Texeira, whose family fell on hard times in the 1950s. Others, like 64-year-old Kathleen Hourigan lament the departure of their fellow Anglo-Indians but say they simply cannot imagine living anywhere else. "We chose to stay because we are Indian. We hate being called 'angrez' (English) by other Indians. It feels like a term of abuse," she told AFP. Hourigan grew up in McCluskieganj and now lives here with her children and grandchildren. "Sure we grumble about this place every time the electricity goes off but the minute it's back, we forget all about it," she said, laughing. "We have no intention of ever leaving. This is home." A disappearing slice of England in an Indian forest McCluskieganj, India

As India inched towards independence, hundreds of mixed-race Anglo-Indians feared for their future and retreated to a self-styled homeland in a thickly forested part of the country. Ernest McCluskie, an Indian of Scottish descent established McCluskieganj in what is now the eastern state of Jharkhand, hoping to attract Anglo-Indians anxious about the impending demise of the British empire. Nearly 80 years on, the few colonial bungalows still standing are in disrepair, the local economy survives on the back of a single school, and McCluskieganj's ageing residents say the 'chhotta England' (little England) they grew up in has vanished forever. Anglo-Indians prospered under British rule with access to good jobs in the railways, armed forces or as customs officers. They spoke English fluently, wore Western-style clothes, ate kedgeriee and pudding and practised Christianity, much like the country's colonial rulers, who reserved jobs for them in several branches of government until 1919. There was still a degree of discrimination, with British officials working in India tending to look down on Anglo-Indian colleagues. Members of the community socialised at their own clubs, since they were usually not admitted into the clubs frequented by colonial officers.

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