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The Words and Images of Mccluskieganj - *A Dreamed Place* -

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Annex A: Travel Itinerary

Introduction

On Sunday 9th of October 2005, I was listening to Radio 4 program called Plain Tales from the Commonwealth. This was a short series of programs that looked the Commonwealth in context of the British Raj and its modern impact on life of certain individuals and communities across the Commonwealth regions.

It was on this program that I first came across the name of McCluskieganj and its people. At that time I just made a quick note of it in my journal, thinking I would make further research when time permitted and might be able to go there should I get an assignment in India.

Towards the end of 2005, I came across the Winston Churchill Fellowship award. This was a crucial part of my life at the time as I was just finishing university and planning to be a professional photojournalist. This was a stage in my career where I wanted to prove my talent and create work that would have an impact on my career and skills as a photojournalist where both words and images of a story play a crucial part.

This is the result of this dream, backed by the Fellowship and its complete support system, I was able to spend seven weeks in McCluskieganj and work on creating the kind of journalist work that would be an important part of my career and future development as a photojournalist.

The Next Step:

Once I started to research McCluskieganj, it became apparent that the place had very strong links with England, through the shared memory of its people who had experienced the British Raj in India and through the pastoral landscape of the community which had been created with a strong notion of what England was like and how their life would reflect the life of those living in England.

This was the real spark of interest for me as a journalist, to bring this back to England and share it with the people and show it in context of modern day India and its relationship with England. With these thoughts in mind, I began my application of the Fellowship and what I wanted to achieve in McCluskieganj should I be selected.

I should state that it is a unique time for this work to be made as this year is the 60th Anniversary of Indian independence from the British Raj, and this community and its relationship with England had direct links with this great historical event.

Aims:

As a journalist whose tools are both photography and writing, I wanted to be in McCluskieganj to record the stories of this small and unique community that had strong historical and contemporary links with a nation that they regarded as mother England.

This would be the point of reference of how the relationship between India and England has developed since the end of the Raj.

My aim was to create a record of the people of McCluskieganj. Using photography and words would create this record. Words that would reflect the changing life of the community and the changes that have come about in how these Anglo Indians

see England. This I felt was very important, as it would also shed light into what the relationship was between India and England and how this would develop in the 21st Century.

I wanted to show these results in England as an exhibition, or a book or a published photo essay. This would be especially important in parts of the country where there was tension between the ethnic Indian community and the local English community. I will later in this report talk about how this work is being distributed and what the results have been so far.

The essay that follows next is an attempt to summaries the ideas and thoughts of McCluskieganj, to place it in historical and contemporary context and to provide support to the images I created in McCluskeiganj



The landscape of McCluskieganj with an abandoned home.

Essay: The Burden of History

This year is the 60th Anniversary of Independence of India from the British rule. This summer, a country that follows cricket via internet videos on mobile phones, where you can drink champagne before a hot stone massage, a land that has proudly renamed itself in its own languages – Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata replacing Bombay, Madras and Calcutta – will be celebrating its freedom. 14 years prior to independence, a small group of Anglo-Indians journeyed to a remote part of eastern India to inaugurate what they thought would be their very own Eden within the vast sub-continent as it hurtled towards separation from Britain. Ernest Timothy McCluskie had brought them there to establish McCluskieganj.

McCluskie, a Irish-Indian land and property merchant from Kolkata, was of considerable wealth and influence. He had been exposed to discrimination from both the British, whose attitude towards the Anglo-Indians (everyone of mixed European and Indian ancestry) was one of indifference, and the Indians, who resented this mixed-race community who had adopted English language as their mother tongue, guaranteeing them jobs in the military and civil service of British India. In turn, the Anglo-Indians did not accept their Indian heritage, and had gained a reputation of looking down on 'pure' ethnic Indians. The 1930s were also the time of the Swadeshi movement, a political movement that promoted Indian self-sufficiency and boycotting of British made products in favor of Indian goods and services, and the complex dream of a multi-regional, multi-religious Indian identity. There was no place for Indians who wanted to be British.

McCluskie became convinced that the way forward for the Anglo-India community to secure a permanent home and greater acceptance in British India was to separate itself from the rest of the country and begin life anew. After numerous rejections, finally the Raja of Ratu, a mid-size principality in east India, agreed to sell him 10,000 acres of forested land of Lapra in what is now known as the state of Jharkhand, created from the split of state of Bihar in year 2000. McCluskie sent out 200,000 circulars to Anglo-Indians all over the country, beckoning them to come and take part in creating an independent home state for Anglo-Indians in India. He founded a company. The Colonization Society of India Ltd began to sell land for Rs.50 per acre for agriculture and Rs.250 per acre for residential plots. Eventually almost 350 families established homes here by the time the British left India in 1947.

Haunted by the fear of not being British enough to be able to migrate to Britain and not Indian enough to stay as freely in India, the Anglo-Indians saw the chance of McCluskieganj as a place that they could finally call truly as their home. Amid an idyllic landscape of fruit orchards, gentle hills carpeted in rich forests for hunting and safari, a sweeping stream with crystal waters completed the picture of a new home for the urbanized Anglo-Indians. They dreamt of becoming farmers, living off the land, and building quaint cottages with green lawns stretching out from the verandah to enjoy tea parties reminiscent of their mother-land England – a land they had never seen. Here they would forget their woes and live a life of great communal harmony. And, in the beginning, the music from tea parties did echo through the forest, and groups of families with their Sunday best would take picnics of fruitcakes and wild game down to the banks of the river to enjoy lazy afternoons of games and chitchat.

The years that followed the 1947 independence have been harsh for the community. The realities of post-independence India forced thousands of Anglo-Indians families from all over India to migrate to the west in search of greater economic prosperity.

Many abandoned McCluskieganj, and the loss of youth has had a far-reaching impact on the community from which it never recovered.

Today, McCluskieganj is still connected to the capital of Ranchi by just one dusty road track where travel after the dusk is not recommended due to fear of bandits. Its one-time famous bakery has closed down; the shops no longer stock the tinned fruits and fine ingredients that were staples of Anglo-Indian cuisine. The railway station of McCluskieganj is being renovated with a walkway bridge to allow pedestrians to cross over to the other side of the track. However, the other side is only a footpath that leads into the forest where dilapidated Anglo-Indian cottages can be seen with collapsed roofs and walls, timber and iron girders plundered for resale on the black market. The romantic vistas and English-cottage-inspired gardens with pink bougainvilleas are now almost impossible to separate from the boundaries of the encroaching forest.

For this Anglo-Indians community, the future is not as rosy as that of rest of India. Crime and poverty are on the doorstep and the help from the local government has been at a snail's pace. McCluskieganj boasts its own Anglo-Indian Member of Legislative Assembly, Mr. J.P. Gaulstun who has promised to push through the needs of the community with the Chief Minister of Jharkand. In a recent visit to the community, Mr. Gaulstun reiterated the need and the importance of the community working together to create a more secure future for its children. No one talks about the actual difficulties of creating new roads, communication, healthcare (at the moment the village health center has no doctor) and welfare support. That might just encourage its residents to move away to other parts of India and abroad. At the same time, any special treatment their community receives is always under scrutiny for the non Anglo-Indians in the area. Favoring a small disappearing village does not win votes during the local elections.

Besides doing odd jobs, the majority of the families have converted their homes to hostels for the students of Don Bosco Academy. This school, opened by a former Anglo-Indian MLA from Patna Aldred De Rozario, has been the one saving grace for the community. However competition to attract these children is intense and has resulted in ruthless economic undercutting between neighbors and friends in a community where harmony and close relationships were once its staple diet.

Despite this fight for daily survival, there is prosperity and willingness amongst some residents to improve their lives and those of other Anglo-Indians.

One of them is 60-year-old Noel Gordon, an Anglo-Indian with Scottish heritage whose family struggled in the years before they opened the student hostel for Don Bosco. Noel spent most of his youth between Ranchi where he studied and worked, and McCluskieganj where his parents lived from 1947. He remembers those days with great love, saying that even "the birds sounded different and the wind had a different feeling as it blew through McCluskieganj. The people here were polite and innocent, they respected individuals".

An intrepid entrepreneur, Noel made the best of what little opportunity that was around him when finally nine years ago he started the hostel. "We did not even have piped water, so we carried water by hand in buckets from the well to bathe the hostel children. My son was helping in the day to day running of the hostel, my wife cleaned the place, and my daughter did the cooking for the kids". Slowly he expanded. He has built a small guesthouse run by his daughter to house the handful of foreigners who visit from England and Australia.

“I am a lover of nature and to be close to nature, McCluskieganj is the right place for me” says Noel, surrounded by his goats, calves, hens, various cats and dogs and wild snakes that return year on year to mate and rear their young, roaming freely around his land. He talks with a deep smile about the life he has created for himself and his family, knowing that the future of McCluskieganj is not secure for his children. But he believes that hard work can turn things around. He says he wants to announce to the Anglo-Indians around the world

“to come and settle in McCluskieganj, to buy land and save a part of their history from being lost” – even though he understands that one of the major failures of the community has been because of its isolated location from a major trading market. And there is no swift solution to this.

Noel affirms that his identity and the future of his heritage is not just a matter of pride. “This is my mother-land and my identity is of Anglo-Indian, but I do not go out of my way to tell everyone. The heritage and identity needs to be remembered and carried forward by my children, because without that we will be lost. As a Protestant Christian I value the goodness in Hinduism”. He ends by saying that “being an Anglo-Indian does not make you great. You need to be equal to everyone and look at everyone in an equal way. The days of the Raj are no longer here, this is a democratic India now with no exceptions and only with hard work and ability will Anglo-Indians get the respect and recognition they want”.

It is a unique experience meeting another member of this community. Michel Perkins is a face of Anglo-Indian community that is rarely talked about. He is one of several examples where the community has adopted non Anglo-Indians into its heart. A non Anglo-Indian by birth who has very much become one is Michael Perkins who was born in 1956 in Kolkata. At the age of eight he was adopted by an Anglo-Indian couple, the retired telegraph engineer John Henry Perkins and his wife Beryl Winifred Perkins. For him McCluskieganj is a very special place and he firmly believes that he is “flying the flag” at their charming and idyllic home Hilltop Haven, for the remaining members of the Perkins family who live in England and Australia. He married outside of the community, which has meant that his children are going to find it easier to be part of the wider community. He has no illusions when he says that in the coming decades McCluskieganj will become less and less Anglo-Indian. But that “the strength that the Anglo-Indians have will help them see through the most difficult of times...that McCluskieganj might be dying but their spirit and identity lives on in other parts of India and around the world”.

The world of McCluskieganj has been one of extremes for Catherine Adelaide Texira, a 56-year-old Anglo-Indian with Welsh and English blood. She has lived in the same house, the Woodlands, since the day she was born, having seen its many glories disappear over time due to lack of money for its upkeep. She nostalgically talks about the early days of her youth when “tea parties and fancy dress were a regular occurrence” and with her friends, “lazy afternoons were spent playing games in the fields that used to belong to her grandfather”.

Her grandfather lost over Rs.40,000 when The Colonization Society of India Ltd collapsed in 1955. The family never recovered from this financial disaster. She remembers that the “locals were polite in the early years. It was the new-comers and the outsiders that taught them to look down upon the Anglo-Indians.” “Now the locals feel that we have to be under their feet and things are getting worse and worse for the Anglo-Indians here”. Over the decade, Catherine’s eleven acres of land have failed to provide adequately. She needs Rs.2700 (£31.50) a month for her and her four children. She makes a living selling fruit at the train station and herbal raw material to the local homeopathic doctor. Every year, she runs up debts which

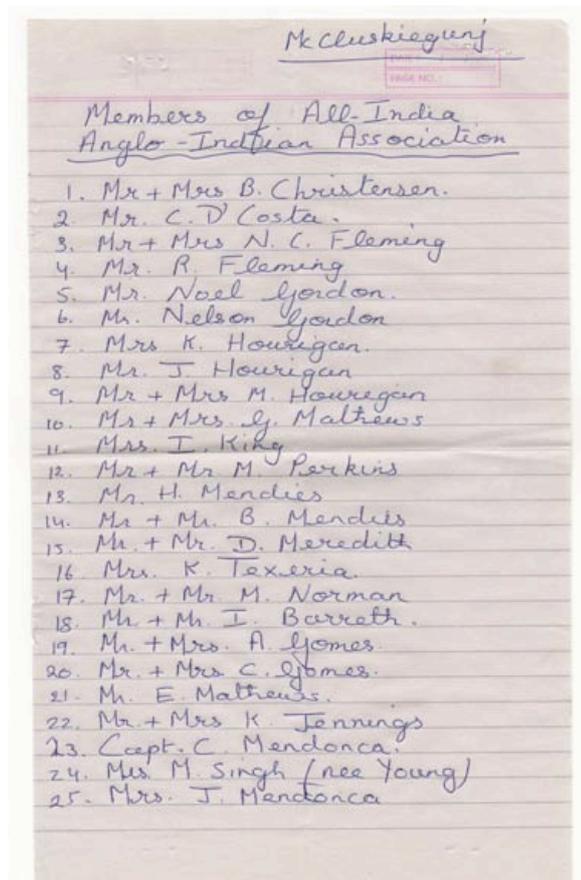
means she cannot afford to buy the fertilizer for thirty mango trees in the orchard or to build a fence around the land to prevent the stray cows from grazing on the young saplings before they have had a chance to grow. She talks with bitterness about the fact that “the local Indians are now better off than the Anglo-Indians and they have tried to adopt customs and lifestyle of the Anglo-Indians. But if they can’t even speak English, they have no chance of becoming like us”.

She has photographs of her and her family when she was young, carefully preserved in an old notebook. The photos of the young beautiful daughter of a comfortable family are a stark contrast to how she lives now.

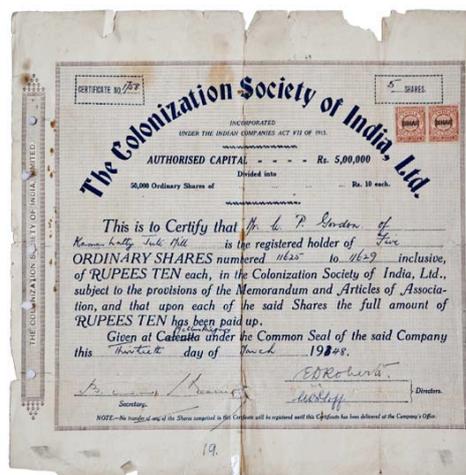
The dream of McCluskeiganj is not a unique one. Time and again communities have attempted to carve their own space out of the sub-continent of India. What however remains very special about this dream of Timothy McCluskie and his intrepid band of Anglo-Indians is the strength and whole heartedness with which they pushed ahead with this notion. And some would say they were almost successful.

The beauty of McCluskieganj is apparent even today. Only the shrilling whistle of the goods train breaks the silence of the day as it passes McCluskieganj station. It does not take a long stretch of imagination for one to see why the Anglo-Indians decided to build their homes here. Of those quaint cottages that survive, some have been bought by prosperous Bengalis from nearby Calcutta as holiday homes or for retirement. They drive down in air-conditioned cars, talking on mobile phones, delighting in the romantic atmosphere of history. But for the twenty Anglo-Indian families who have remained loyal to McCluskieganj, the fight for daily survival makes the past glories seem a long time ago.

Anglo-Indian families in McCluskiengaj: December 2006



The certificate issued to the residents for purchase of land in McCluskiengaj



Essay: Images of McCluskieganj



Kitty at home, McCluskieganj, Jharkhand, India



Abandoned home belonging to a family who has left McCluskieganj

Conclusion

In looking at how successfully my Fellowship has been in terms of achieving its aims, I would like to very briefly talk about the dissemination of the information, which will also be the conclusion of this report.

In May 2007, Spectrum magazine in Scotland on Sunday devoted 4 pages to this work, and it has been received with much success. In August this year, Geographic Magazine of Asia will devote 10 pages to these images and text. This magazine has an extensive publication in Asia and USA, and so the reach and spread of this work is going to be very broad.

In terms of creating an exhibition of the material, the Royal Albert Hall exhibition space is being considered and I will be able to give further information once the curator gives me the final answer.

On my personal achievement, in creating this work, I have been exposed to learning and taking part in a very focused and personal journalistic experience. This without the support of the Fellowship would have been impossible. For this I am very grateful to the Trust in the experience it allowed me to gain, and to learn from.

Update:

Recently I created an artist's book, inspired by the image from McCluskieganj:



Annex A: Travel Itinerary

LONDON TO NEW DELHI: November 8th, 2006

NEW DELHI TO MCCLUSKIEGANJ: November 10th, 2006

MCCLUSKIEGANJ TO NEW DELHI: December 19th, 2006

NEW DELHI TO MUMBAI: December 19th, 2006

MUMBAI TO LONDON: December 20th, 2006