Adapting to the Future, Taking Strength from the Past

In part by circumstance, in part by design, from their betel gardens in the hills beyond Kulaura the wary Khasis have most often kept mainstream society at a distance. But increasingly they are discovering the need to engage, to protect their rights and build a better future. At the same time, the community's self-confidence is growing through a process of rediscovering their written language and history.

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PHOTOS: ANDREW EAGLE

Apart from the stars, the night's leafy darkness had only been broken by a chain of orange-tinted lights and the glow of distant lower towns on the plains. The lights were spaced along the far hill and marked the Indian border. Which towns of Moulvibazar District were glowing was not certain: was that Robi Bazar or Kamalganj? Was that Kulaura? On the other side, the villagers said, one town-glow marked Tripura's Kailashahar, the other Dharmanagar. The oxygen was unadulterated, the silence almost magical in this land of the seven huts. It'd seemed a shame to sleep.

Eyes opened as the rooster crowed. Dawn had arrived in Kukijuri. In the village of the Khasis perched on jungle hilltop, as it should be, activity begins with first light. Yards are being swept, clothes washed and hung to dry. Henry Talang wanders over from the main house. I suspect there'll soon be tea.

Talang, 30, is the Montri's second son. Montri is the title for the leader of a Khasi village. By tradition he chooses his successor from among his sons – whichever he deems most capable; or in the case of no sons he might choose a son-in-law. But there's flexibility. A Montri can hold his title until death or retire. Villagers sometimes elect a new Montri and there are also punjees – what Khasi villages are called – run by committee. In Kukijuri though, it looks as though Talang is next in line. He's already responsible for much of the punjee's affairs, which is probably the reason he often carries a look of tension.



Betel vines growing in Belwa Punjee.