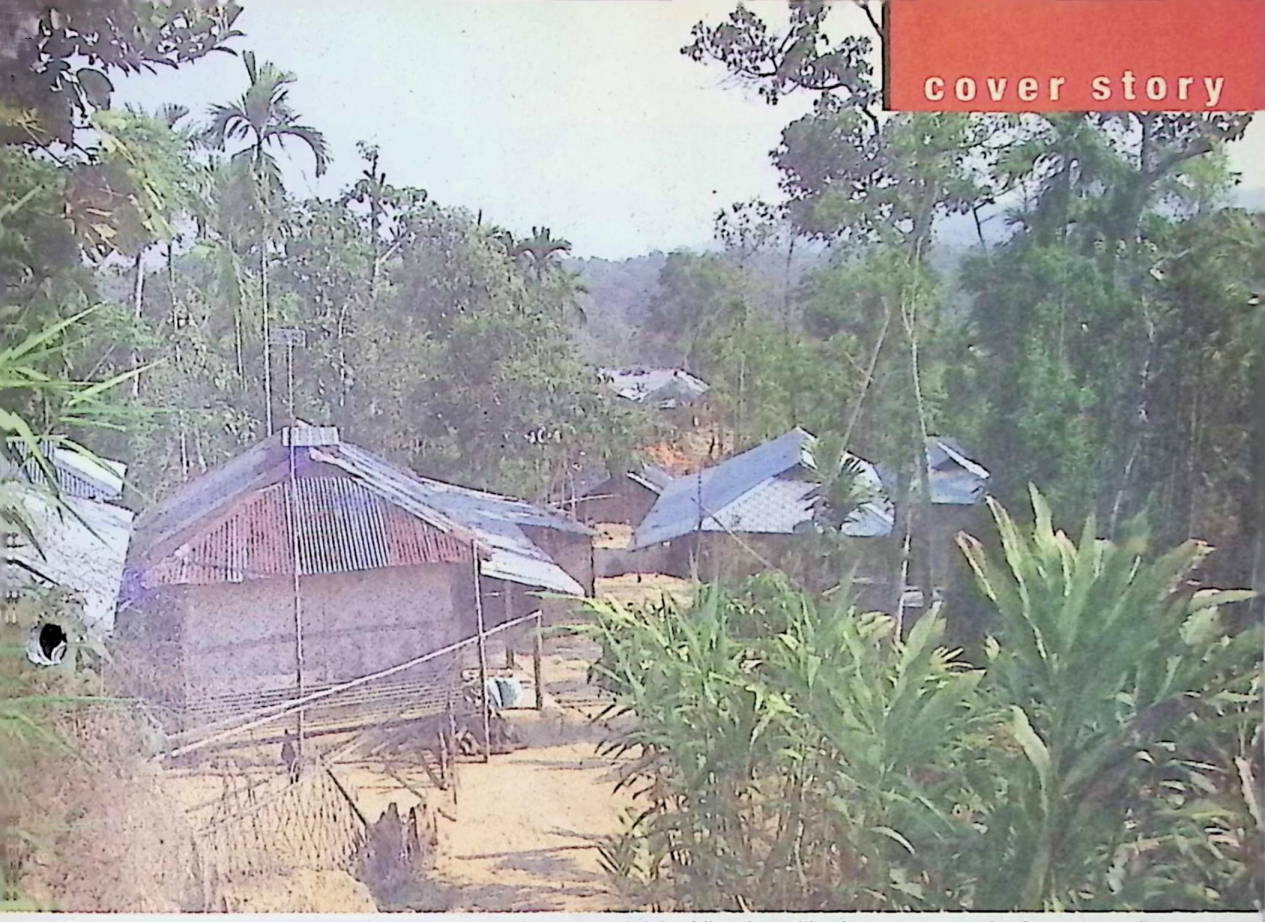


Belwa Punjee is very remote, but even there some houses are brick while others, like these ones, are simpler constructions.

Nothing in a punjee can happen without the Montri's approval. As a visitor it was natural to go to his house first. It's why I was invited to stay there. The Montri's house isn't hard to find. It's usually the highest house in the punjee.

"Bengali tourists don't come here," current Montri, Joseph Konglah, 65, said on the previous evening. "Only foreigners come. About eight years ago some Spaniards came. A French couple stayed here once."

Talang promised that after breakfast we could walk in the hills. The goal was to reach even more remote punjees. But before that, in first morning light it was as well to consider Kukijuri – the surprise of finding such a well-established village high on a hill was not diminished but refreshed. Most houses were brick – and every brick was carted in, through the tea gardens, along the muddy path that follows the gully and merges in narrow spaces with the stream. Every brick was hauled up the hillside by hand, along the same path I'd taken.

On the ridgeline is a basic iron gate to mark entry to the punjee. Inside, among the houses of the 47 families are two churches – Kukijuri is 80% Catholic and 20% Presbyterian – and a primary school. As is customary for the Khasis the surrounding areas are betel gardens: well-tended, semi-cleared areas of forest. The betel vines grow on taller trees and do best with a good dose of sunlight. Betel leaf and areca nut are the main cash crops.

At the back of the Montri's house the pigs have started shuffling about in their pens. They're hungry and grunting. Wood's been chopped and stacked high ready for winter. It's neat and orderly.

A few villagers are disappearing into the forest. They've set off along winding, rough paths that lead into the valleys. They've each got soap and a towel, ready to bathe in a stream.

But most prefer to wait for water to reach them. It's carried up in buckets, very often by tea garden labourers. The gardens are some miles off but the labourers are keen to earn extra, early morning cash. Each bucket will fetch ten taka on one of Kukijuri's verandas. Water fees: it's in the nature of a hilltop Khasi economy.

The day in Kukijuri began with the rooster crowing – as though he was inviting sunlight into the hills. Of course with each sunrise starts the way to the future. And yet that dawn also felt untarnished and ancient, as though finding inner strength requires a reconnection with the past.

When *U Blei* of the old belief first thought to create the world, did he plan for his Khasi to settle in these hills? He is *U Blei*, she is *Ka Blei* and they are *Ki Blei*: God belongs to every