

Kukijuri primary school has 46 students. Teacher Probin Areng, at the back, believes education is key to a better future.

have none. This does not help the Khasi when forest officers come knocking.

The Montri of Ishachora Punjee nearer to the tea gardens put it this way: "The Forest Department officials are very pleasant. We drink tea together... and then they want money or trees. If we refuse they make false cases." Honesty is highly prized in Khasi culture. They don't bargain. They don't lie. One wonders how much the cultural gap exacerbates these difficulties.

On behalf of Kukijuri, Talang says he is currently involved in seven cases – and the expense of pursuing justice involving lawyers and trips to Dhaka's High Court is a drain on punjee finances. In Belwa too, the new Montri singles out forestry cases. "The Montri's work is very tough," he says, "There's much to do – the cases are the worst."

Indeed a Montri's responsibilities are many. He mediates disputes, ensures the sick are attended to and maintains the punjee's accounts recording betel leaf sales. He also leases land to each family – Khasis traditionally practice collective property rights. According to the Bangladesh District Gazetteer, Sylhet, of 1970, the Montri "pokes his nose in every business."

Joyanto Lawrence Raksham, 38, is a Mandi (Garo) who, as project coordinator for local NGO, Indigenous People's Development Services (IPDS), has been working with the punjees of Kulaura for six years. As a student he had Khasi friends and assumed punjees would not be dissimilar to Mandi villages. "But I saw it was not like ours," he says, "The Khasis live in a tight community; Mandi villages are not like that. Khasis are united and uncompromising. Their sense of nationalism is strong. Whereas Mandis will readily speak Bangla, even to each other, Khasis don't – and I couldn't understand a word!"

While the Mandi once had a similar – *nokma* – governance system it has declined in importance and Raksham needed to adjust to the Montri way of getting things done. He noted that Khasi villages tended to be located in isolated areas away from Bengali villages and towns – and juxtaposed to their hospitality he soon understood Khasis are by nature reserved and wary of outsiders. "It took time to win their trust," he says.

Yet perhaps because of their isolation and self-sufficiency, Khasis have been able to preserve more of their self-identity through the conversion to Christianity and into the modern era. Punjees at their best are free of crime and serious internal conflict. While matrilineal traditions are changing – in Kukijuri males now commonly inherit an equal property share – women have a high status. "Though the eldest earning male member is the manager of the family" reads the Gazetteer, "his wife exercises