greater influence." Marriages and divorces are straightforward and common with no stigma attached. It's even possible for Khasi couples to raise a family without the formal acknowledgement of marriage.

It's unsurprising that such liberties and localised harmony invoke a sense of protectiveness. Nonetheless, nowadays Raksham can understand some Khasi language and he is often considered as an honorary Montri. Khasis share their problems with him.

funded by Norwegian missionary aid.

"Our punjee was really poor but for the last five years the betel grew well," says Rosebell.

By mid-afternoon Talang and I have completed the strenuous climb back to Kukijuri. In the meantime the bazaar has arrived. Shoes, clothes, utensils... every imaginable item is carted up the hill by Bengali traders to be sold door to door.

I am invited to the primary school a few hundred yards along the ridge from the Montri's house. It consists of one long room with a large blackboard at



Ishachora Punjee is at a much lower altitude, near to the tea gardens.

From Belwa, Talang and I backtrack some way before heading along a new path to reach 14-year-old Dulukchara Punjee. "We don't have a Montri," says Rosebell Khasi, inviting us into his home, "This is a committee punjee." Rosebell's father was the previous Montri before he retired; his son is a committee member.

Dulukchara is home to 25 families – 5 Catholic, 15 Presbyterian and the remainder followers of the old religion. There's a new church under construction and a primary school of 30 students

one end and a smaller one at the other. There are several long tables and benches, also mats to sit on.

Teacher Probin Areng, 56, is undoubtedly grateful for the two blackboards and seating options. As the only teacher, he instructs classes KG to 5 simultaneously, to cover the ages of the school's 46 students. Areng is Mandi – he decided to move to Kukijuri in recent years after buying a betel garden nearby, and has brought the teaching experience of a long career, including fourteen years at Laxmipur Mission High School in the plains.