

Many of the homes in Kukijuri are brick.

It's hardly unusual for a Khasi punjee to have a resident Mandi teacher. Not too many years ago for lack of qualified Khasis all the local teachers were Mandi. It's a circumstance that hasn't changed much. "At first they didn't want to study," Areng says of his experience, "I had to drag them to school! They were scared."

Yet, he's a teacher with high hopes. "Education is the key to the future," he says, "Earlier people did not take care about education – things are changing but it will take time."

It's not only a matter of keeping students enthusiastic – each month in the presence of the Montri, Areng meets their guardians. "I tell parents to give love and support, to ask their children what they learnt and how school is going – to take an interest."

"I like to see my students succeed," he says. "Fourteen are at college, twenty-seven at high school. I have former students working with the church and NGOs. I'm really pleased."

But for Kukijuri's families enrolling children beyond class 5 isn't straightforward. The nearest schooling options for higher grades, Haiderganj and Laxmipur, are each several kilometres away, entailing the additional expense of boarding hostels. For university the most common choices are Sylhet or Dhaka. Of the few who complete university, most don't return.

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Cecelia Lamarong 32, and Monica Khonglah, 30, are welcome exceptions. Khasis with tertiary qualifications from Dhaka, these two confident and articulate pioneers teach at the Laxmipur Mission High School – Areng's former stomping ground. Indeed, as former students they number among his successes.

"To go from one culture to another is difficult," says Khonglah of her university days in Dhaka a decade ago. "The adjustment is hard. Dhaka is a big city – the houses are different. Things move very quickly and everybody speaks Bangla. We come from the punjee!"