She mentions the shock of seeing women wearing burqas for the first time. "Women in Dhaka are also free," she says, "but we were used to the punjee where even at night there is no risk to women walking about."

"When we studied there," says Lamarong, "there were only thirteen Khasis living in Dhaka."

One advantage of having Khasi teachers is that when students have difficulties they are better placed to help. "If they don't understand in Bangla," says Khonglah, "we can explain in Khasi." "We understand what's different for them," adds Lamarong.



Tadpoles in a stream in the valley below Kukijuri.

Another innovation has been the inclusion of Khasi language classes. While previously the Khasi language, written in Latin script, was sometimes taught informally through churches, classes are now held for eighty students after their other classes are done. "At first they didn't like it," says Khonglah, "But I teach songs, poetry and rhymes and they perform them at school."

The Khasi language was once endangered but has experienced a revival. In particular the written form is not well-entrenched in Bangladesh, given that books needed to be imported from India. But last year Caritas started publishing texts for PG to class 2 locally.

A similar initiative has been running in Ishachora Punjee since 2008. With funding from Oxfam, IPDS opened a Khasi language centre that introduces 30 students to their native language, including its written form, each morning before school.

Like Areng, Khonglah and Lamarong believe education is a means to secure a better future. "Don't rely on the betel garden," Lamarong tells her students, "Do something else as well."

"Besides," says Khonglah, "there's climate change – less rain – a problem for betel cultivation."

In recent decades Christian attitudes have shifted towards recognising the inherent value of local cultures. The new approach has encouraged the Khasis, despite in many ways having maintained their separate identity, to re-engage with their past. And that is, of course, to know themselves better.

It's not only the written language and literature being revived. Since 2008 Bangladeshi Khasis have recommenced celebrating an important pre-Christian festival Shad Suk Mynsiem, which symbolises spring and thanksgiving for the land. This has generated renewed pride in Khasi clothes, song and dance. "We used to sing English and Bangla songs," says Khonglah, "We thought we didn't need our traditions. But now we understand it's our culture. We started Shad Suk Mynsiem again and now I really feel it."

Together with strengthened efforts in modern education and better attempts to connect with mainstream society – such as by pursuing their rights through the courts, renewed cultural awareness can only be an asset, allowing coming generations of Khasis to more fully and confidently contribute, to bring to the fore the wealth of their cultural experience and unique history. Despite the contemporary challenges it's easy to be optimistic that Khasis will be able to realise their full potential not only as Khasis but as Bangladeshis. In the process, the life of the nation is sure to be enriched.

There's another Khasi myth which says that brother and sister – the moon and sun – once danced together. Everybody said it was sinful, being from the same family. From shame the sun hid herself in a cave and the Earth descended into darkness. People tried every means to coax the sun out, and ultimately they deployed a rooster as messenger. It was with the rooster's crowing that the sunlight came again. ■