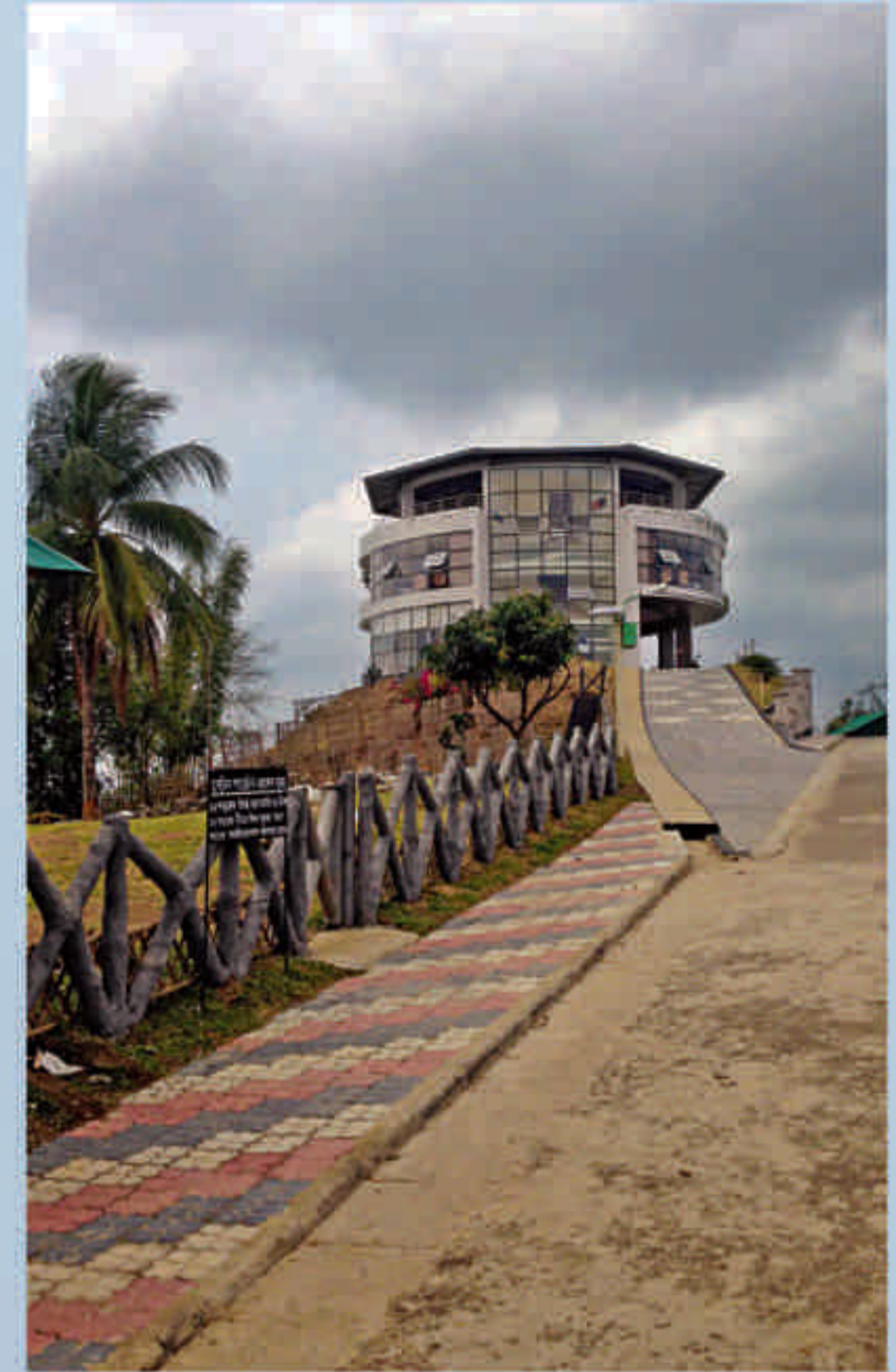


# Into the clouds



Dawn peeps in on the chatter of crickets and birds. The forested hills make way to an unsuspecting audience waking up to the shimmer of the first rays through the tree tops. The bus tires hug the paved roads so delicately as not to create a ripple in the liquid serenity. Yet, a gush of wind tells you that you are countenanced by the hills and may persist to the valley of clouds.

We reach Khagrachori, sleepy and quiet, in the morning. A different vehicle is now required to reach Sajek. An old jeep, locally called "Chander Gari", is waiting for us. "It is old but sturdy", assures our driver, as ancient as the Chander Gari itself. The roads are steeper and populated this time. A plump child smiles hanging on his mums back.

The valley takes us in by the light of dusk. The hills stand perfectly green with a red tiled house at the far end. A windmill is turning somewhere and you look up to realise that the sky is never just blue. The invigorating clouds encircling above you as you lie down on the grass hold infinite shades of colours that change by the moment. So, you frantically look in all directions and each demands your attention with their spectacle.

The amber clouds are solemn in their place, taking a darker hue every now and

then. The mauve ones are a bit busier (as you would expect from a purple cloud) crashing onto the waves of azure with the mischief of a child. They intertwine and untangle just to dissolve into the ocean of clouds. You almost worry that a colossal ship is coming your way but the sky turns tangerine just on time.

The deep blue curtain falls at last. The show is over, which makes you scream and run in exhilaration and fall on your face. It is still okay because the grass is soft and you cannot wait for the next. The day is set on a quest for the unknown and the adventure starts early.

As you walk through the valley in the breeze, you see the wrinkles and creases of the mountains filled in by the fallen clouds. You become a part of the sea green that is now crowned in white. The paved walkways remind you of a place unknown. So, you go past the habitations of wild flowers and bamboo trees.

The enchanted forest emerges. Here stands an abandoned shack engulfed in a thick mist as if a cloud has been stuck here for millions of years. The trees are leafless,

wearing the mist as their foliage. Time becomes obsolete and language redundant. You are in a trance, veiled from the rest of the world, feeling your soul breathe.

Slow beats of a drum break the charm. It is Sunday in the small church. Toddlers keep pace with their mums holding small books of psalms.

Their faces under the veneer of severity of the occasion but their eyes glimmer at seeing you, a stranger. Voices join the drum now. The hills echo with songs of praise. You go back to the timelessness of the valley. The rhythm keeps reality away.

**By Afsin Ahmed**

**Photo: Mohiuddin Pritom**

