

(FOR A LIFE) ON THE ROAD

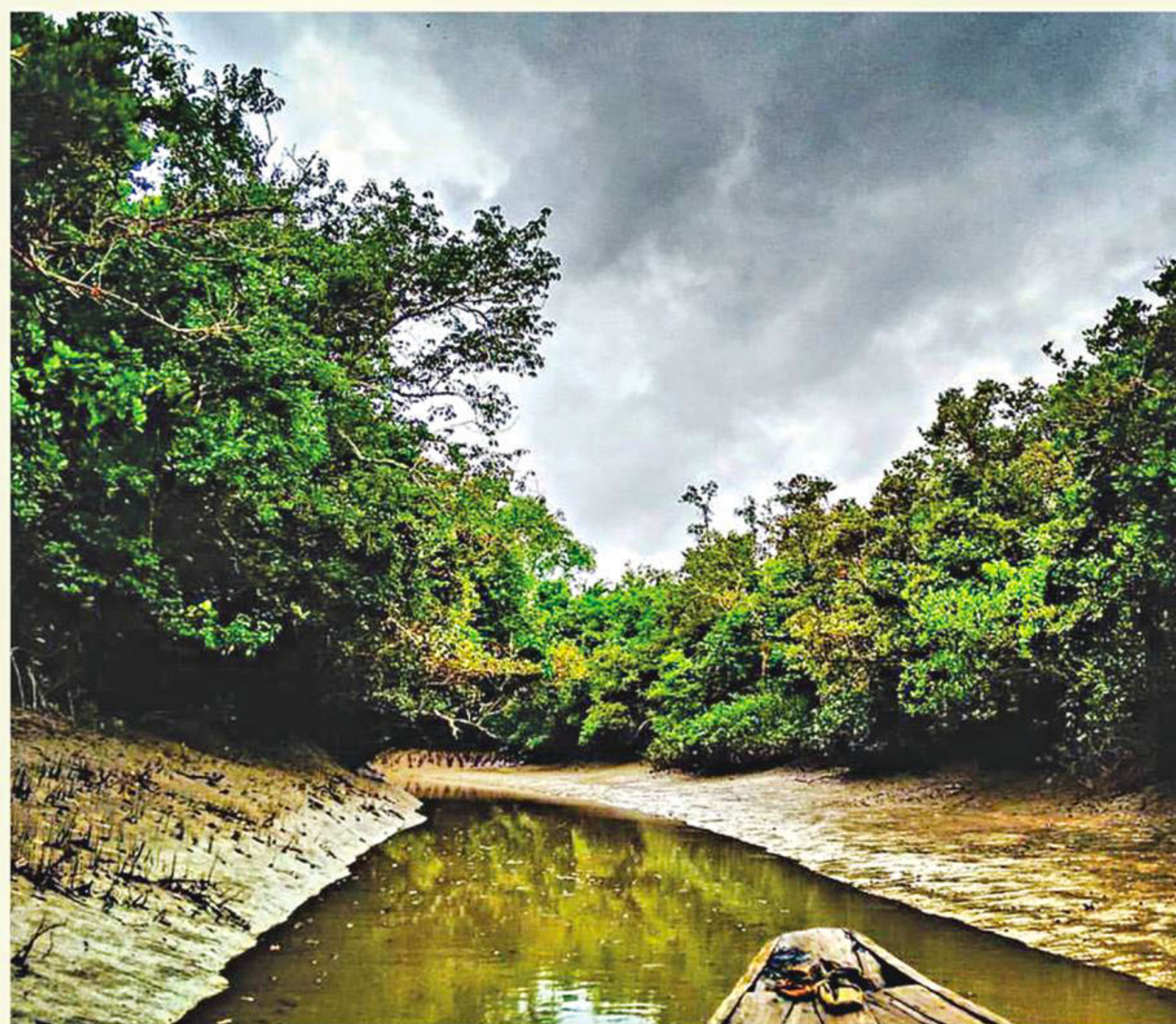


PHOTO: ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

A narrow creek inside the treacherous mangrove forest.

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Into villages fighting every day to save their crops from rising salinity, into water-logged narrow village roads—into a life far-removed from mine. And it immediately reminded of me of Pico Iyer's essays on travels and how he said "Yet for me the first great joy of traveling is simply the luxury of leaving all my beliefs and certainties at home, and seeing everything I thought I knew in a different light, and from a crooked angle."

In those wintry, dusty few days in Satkhira, every act took on a new meaning for me. It was one of the first times I was travelling without any family members in tow and I was reminded



Sundarbans

that I was a young fool out on the roads.

It brought rushing back those cheesy lines I had read before which more or less condensed to one glaring fact: that we travel to become young fools, to fall

in love again, like Iyer so rightly pointed out.

I was made privy to the private lives of people striving to survive on the bare minimum. They opened their doors to me and showed the impact nature had on them. As the salt water crept in on them, the villagers of Lawdob near the Sundarbans spoke candidly of how they kept moving their deep-water tube-wells from one location to another in a desperate attempt to ensure fresh drinking water for their families.

The trip was a stark reminder of what George Santayana wrote in his essay "The Philosophy of Travel", that "we need sometimes to escape into open solitudes, into aimlessness, into the moral holiday of running some pure hazard, in order to sharpen the edge of life, to taste hardship, and to be compelled to work desperately for a moment at no matter what."

From the treacherous Sundarbans, travels took me to the north. As you travel through Bangladesh, you notice the changes are very slow to come by. There is an almost dreadful monotony and homogeneity to the scenes around you. But change, it does. What hits you about the north, is how slow life is, how tremendous its sunsets are, and how extravagant the names of its rivers are. From the azure blue Brahmaputra snaking through many districts of the

north to the very modest, almost thread-like 'Teernoil' river in Tetulia, the north made no qualms in going all poetic with naming their rivers.

By the time I made it from south to north, the travel-bug had bitten me and I completely and thoroughly started to disagree with Ralph Waldo Emerson who thought that travel was unnecessary for self-development and said in his essay "Self-Reliance", that "Traveling is a fool's paradise."

If travel was a fool's paradise, then so be it, because at least by being a fool, I could reach paradise. As I snaked hilly roads on a motorcycle on the beaten tracks of Askipara, a Garo village in Haluaghat of Mymensingh, the oddly humid but cool wind caressing my neck, I could not for one moment think, why anyone would not allow themselves the chance to be a fool?

Soon though, travel became more than an attempt to find fool's paradise. Because as you travel through Bangladesh, paradise is hard to come by. Although pristine beauty engulfs you wherever you go, it also leaves you shaken, it makes you move from your complacency. Because right in front of you lies bare the stark realities of life in this



country. The serenity of rural Bangladesh is in blunt collusion with the hardships that natural calamities have left on this country and each passing moment is a pressing reminder of the many more threats that climate change poses on this deltaic plain, the only home many of us know.

I have to resort to quoting Iyer yet again, "We travel, then, in part just to shake up our complacencies by seeing all the moral and political urgencies, the life-and-death dilemmas, that we seldom have to face at home. Travel is the best way we have of rescuing the humanity of places, and saving them from abstraction and ideology."

Perhaps no one essay or philosopher or critical thinker can sum up the meaning of travel. As you continue to move, the character of the place changes and with it you too change, possibly for the better.

I cannot help but end my piece with a quote from a book that always makes me want to immediately pack my bags and leave "The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun."