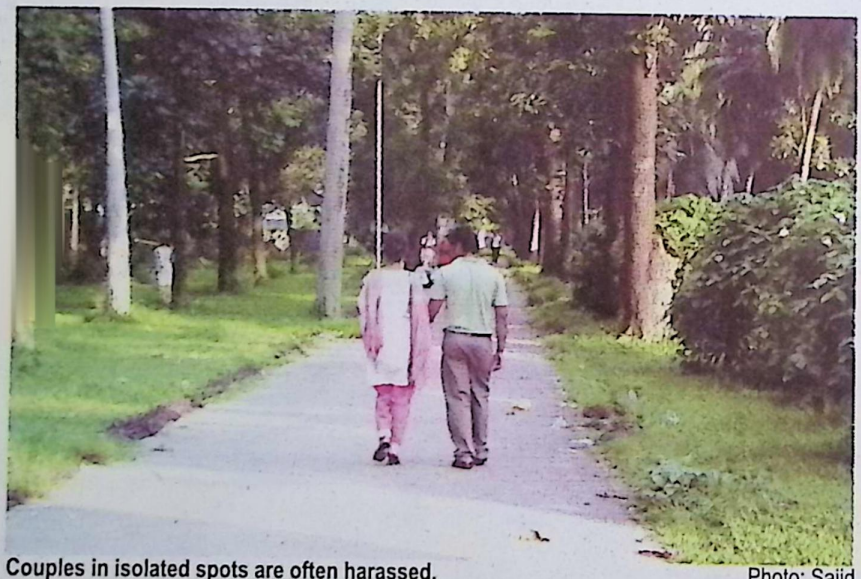
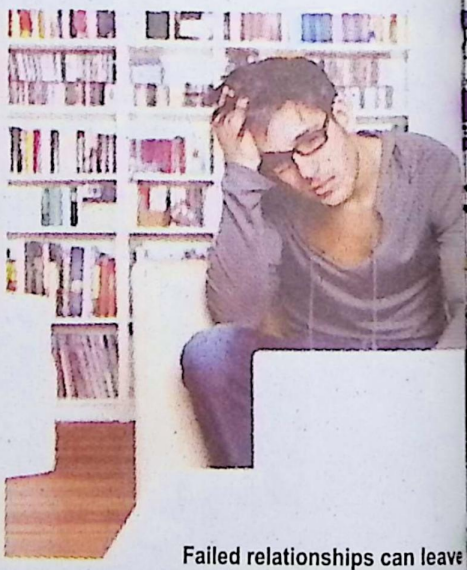
Rizwan Ahmed, a 31-year-old businessman, thought he had found the girl of his dreams when he met Rosy. She was good-looking, vivacious and fun to be with. They had "met" in a chat room and exchanged phone numbers. After the first mobile calls went well, they met up in a shopping mall. For Rizwan it was love at first sight. He ignored the fact that she always seemed a little vague about where she studied. He showered her with gifts, and spent more and more time in her company. One day, she invited her to his home. Her parents were away, she said, and she had cooked especially for him. Rizwan arrived at the address in Shaplabagh with a box of orchids. The area seemed run down and the house seemed deserted. Rosy led him to the drawing room and asked him to wait while she "changed." She never returned.

Six men -- local goons -- came in and accused Rizwan of "harassing" a local girl. They forced him to give them his wallet and mobile phone. They took his photograph. If he came back, or called again, they would "take action" they said. Rizwan went away shaken and nursing a bruised ego. He tried calling Rosy's number, but it was always switched off. He never heard from "Rosy" again.



Couples in isolated spots are often harassed.

Photo: Sajid



Failed relationships can leave broken hearts in its wake.

Nusrat and Rizwan are not isolated cases. Focus groups and anecdotal evidence clearly show that more and more people in Bangladesh are looking for romantic love as the preferred route to finding their life partners. This "love boom" -- aided by technology and spurred on by the media -- is pushing at the boundaries of tradition. But for many people these are uncharted waters, and the new era of openness holds unexpected pitfalls for the unwary. Also, the very technology that helps us maneuver between social barriers can sometimes leave us dangerously exposed.

The problem is not the technology or the new social norms but the way in which we use them, according to Dr. Khondoker Mokaddem Hossain, Professor of Sociology at Dhaka University. "Our society is in a sense in transition," says Professor Hossain. "The influence of the family and that of religion is waning on today's young adults. The cultural influence of the media-- movies, the internet and mobile phones-- cannot be ignored. Our young people see what their counterparts in other countries are doing, and naturally they feel the urge to do the same. But ours is a society still rooted in tradition. Our young people may not yet have the social attitude and tools that their counterparts in the West and even India may have. Therein lies the conflict."

Attitudes towards courtship and marriage are certainly changing in our society. With the advent of technology, 'spreading the net' in our search for that special someone has taken on a whole new meaning. It is not only incredibly interesting, but for the first time in man's social evolution, distance and locality do not seem to pose the problems they once did. This is liberating, but it can also open the door to deception, misrepresentation and sometimes downright criminal activity.

Theoretically it has never been easier to push the right buttons in search of a compatible partner. Numerous chat sites and online dating sites cater to lonely hearts. If you want to organise your social life online and meet compatible people, you have Facebook or Myspace. Many people are successfully blurring the lines between social networking sites and dating sites and bringing a more sociable, interactive element into online dating. The popularity of FM band radio has also added a new element.

Then of course there is the ubiquitous mobile phone. Mobile phones today are game consoles, still cameras, video recorders, email systems, text messengers, carriers of entertainment and business data-- all rolled in one