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FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

## Let Dhaka's rivers flow again

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We commonly name Bangladesh as nodimatrik, implying that the river is mother to this deltaic land. Civilisation has always flourished here centring rivers. But over the decades, our rivers have lost their lustrous glory. And one strong manifestation of that is the river system of Dhaka.

Considering the present appalling state of the rivers in and around Dhaka, it feels quixotic to think that these water bodies could be restored to their natural forms. However, if things are dealt with strategically, from a policy perspective, there is still hope to one day have Dhaka's rivers flowing freely.

The first advantage is Dhaka's positioning and the frequency of rainfall here, as the city receives about 2,200 mm of rain annually. Therefore, if we can address pollution at its sources, our river system can function properly again, thanks to its quick-healing ecosystem and the rivers' lotic nature. If authorities can clean out even half of the pollution from Dhaka's rivers, nature will take care of the rest.

With a vision to turn this into reality, the Umbrella Investment Plan for Dhaka Rivers was prepared and adopted by the government. It aims to revitalise the Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakkhya, Balu and Dhaleshwari rivers, and make them flow better over the next seven years. In the plan, it was proposed that several ministries work together. Their responsibilities have also been outlined. The World Bank has done a survey and a set of projects have been selected through which to implement the master plan.

The aim of the plan should be realised through proper management of municipal solid waste and sewage, cleaning of polluted debris from the river beds, and the augmentation of river flow. As per the sewage master plan, Dhaka Wasa needs to establish fully functional sewage treatment systems in different regions to manage the sewage of the whole

city. As industrial waste is a strong contributor to river pollution, factory owners must make their effluent treatment plants (ETP) operational before releasing effluent into the open environment. The capital's solid waste management needs to be handled by its two city corporations, as well as the ones in Gazipur and Narayanganj cities. Industrial waste management must be ensured by industry owners, in compliance with environmental regulations. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) is in charge of cleaning rivers and disposing of dredged spoils in an environment friendly manner. The Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), meanwhile, will work for the augmentation of the rivers' flow.

The time has come to overcome institutional hurdles and steer the master plan towards an optimistic direction. Institutional capacity and political decisions play a crucial role here. But to implement the river master plan, we need better integration. The agencies concerned have not come under one umbrella yet. They need to sit together, mainstreaming the consideration of river restoration, and decide the coordination between the various projects. The members of the inter-ministerial committee should act proactively and steer the plan towards completion.

No doubt, it is complicated to implement projects that require the involvement of multiple bodies. Yet, there are instances of successful projects that multiple authorities have collaborated on. For example, in the government's Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP), the duties of several agencies were made specific, funds were allocated for each agency, and provisions were made to spend the funds independently. Taking lessons from projects like this, those in charge of the river restoration plan could create an

umbrella project with specific sub-components as delineated in the master plan. Development agencies and banks may be partners as per their suitability. To note, although the duration of the project is seven years, its benefits should start to show within two to three years. Hence, the authorities involved must not lose precious time by delaying their work any longer. If they miss even one monsoon, huge losses will be incurred in terms of the progress of the master plan.

Similarly, an active stance from the associated ministries and agencies is instrumental. A mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches is imperative. Each agency within the master plan needs to set specific targets for itself. The Department of Environment must be engaged during the whole duration of the river restoration plan and provide technical knowledge and support in areas of pollution management, environmental protection, and ecological restoration.

We suggest that the Dhaka river restoration master plan get the status of a megaproject. This will accelerate its progress optimally. It should be noted that the nature of this master plan is different from that of other infrastructure projects in terms of its lack of tangible progress. That is, the benefits of sewage treatment and industrial waste management are not as visible as the progress of infrastructural projects such as the Padma Bridge, Dhaka metro rail, or Terminal 3 of Dhaka airport. However, after the completion of the master plan, the benefits of ecological restoration of rivers around Dhaka will be clearly felt by the people living here.

The Dhaka river restoration master plan is ambitious, but it is not unrealistic. Given our aim of becoming a developed country by 2041, we cannot afford to have the rivers around our capital in such dire conditions. Clean rivers and cities are essential indicators of development. If the river master plan is implemented, the environment, water resources, and the ecology of Dhaka will improve significantly. The agencies concerned must move to action now, instead of remaining trapped within the rhetoric of policies and planning.

## Children's safety online remains a concept



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Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children (ATSEC), has many years of experience in legally dealing with traffickers and victims of trafficking.

According to her recent findings, underage girls living in slums are regularly abused by slum managers when their mothers go off to work. When the children become victims, these mothers do not seek legal support for fear of losing a place to stay or facing societal backlash. Once these girls become victims of abuse—and given that they do not get support from their family or from society—their attitude changes and they look for the kind of escape that social media offers.

In some cases, the girls fall victim to "love" through their engagements in the virtual world. They take aggressive measures to get out of their homes and experience "freedom." Even sadder is the fact that, after running away from home to marry a boy they met online or being trapped by trafficking gangs, many girls often do not want to be rescued.

Advocate Salma believes that there should have been a system to monitor children from both privileged and underprivileged

With many schools being closed because of the ongoing nationwide political strikes and blockades, children from all strata of society are once again logged in for online classes. Most of these children have a phone and full access to the internet. However, as far as their online activities are concerned, parents cannot possibly monitor it all.

Unfortunately, children can be exposed to anything on the internet, without realising the seriousness of a given situation. And parents, too, are of not much help, as many refuse to believe that their child can do anything wrong.

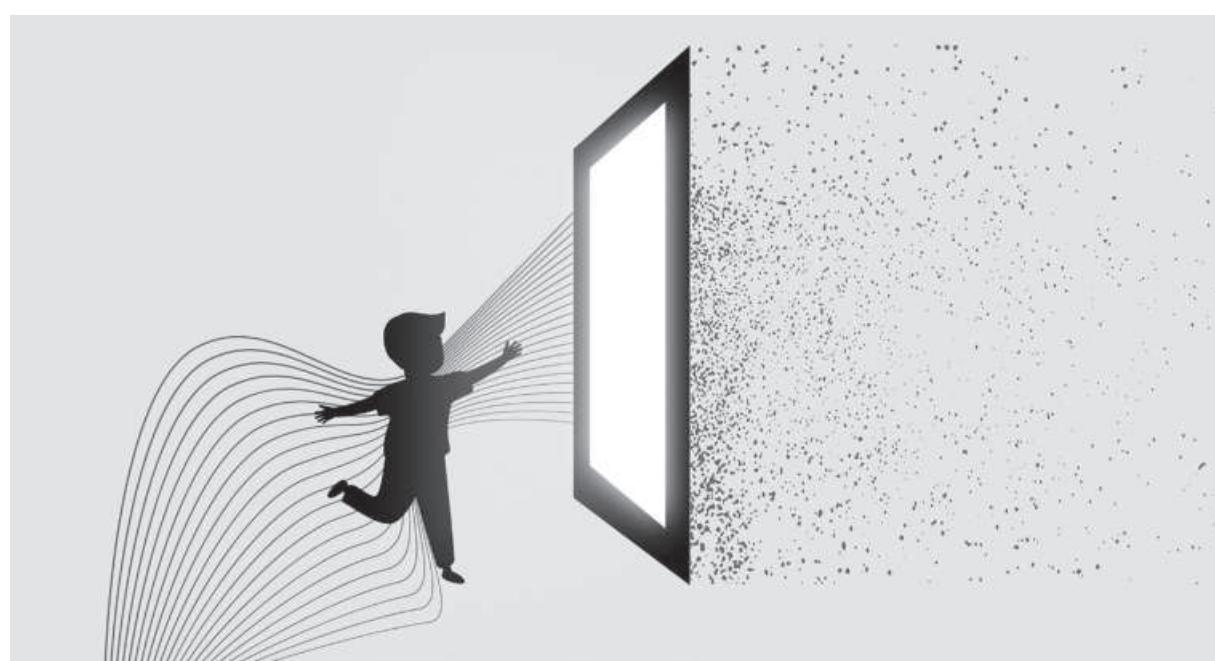
Many of the people encountered by children on the internet may expose them to inappropriate content, including cyberspace's

live online sexual abuse materials have turned into a million dollar business. Child exploiters use cyberspace to network for child sex tourism, prostitution, and even trafficking.

The allure of money also works as an incentive for young people indulging in pornography. Contrary to what we believe, such business schemes are aplenty. Participants earn good money by telling fabricated, erotic stories about themselves, and even engaging in cyber sex.

Specialists like Sirajul and Zahereen believe that local pornography and obscene content that are widespread denounce and humiliate women. These are worse than erotica because they give rise to violence against women and girls.

Moreover, drugs and substance



VISUAL: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

most popular vice: pornography. In the form of pictures, videos or text, sexually provocative content is often laid bare for children or adolescents.

Sirajul Hossain, the managing director at Cybernetic Systems Ltd and a social researcher, has been voicing his concerns regarding children and the threat of pornography for a long time. He believes that as discussions surrounding sex are taboo in our society, the secrecy gives rise to curiosity, leading to misogynistic traits in boys and exhibitionist behaviour in girls.

Research conducted by Sirajul and others shows that the use of the internet and social media platforms is feeding girls' imaginations. They often develop histrionic personalities, and the unlimited access to mobile phones gives them a great degree of freedom. Some young girls may lead secret lives, unbeknownst to their guardians. In the extreme cases, their online conduct ends up making them victims of abusive and exploitative situations.

Shabnaaz Zahereen is a child protection specialist working for Unicef, and her research tries to explain how child pornography and

abuse by adolescents also induce an affinity for harmful sexual behaviour. The uncontrolled use of the internet and digital technology, negligence and ignorance from the parents' side, and lack of sensitivity from teachers, communities and law enforcement agencies have led to such a situation.

Added to these is the loose

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enforcement of legislation. Lack of reporting and a weak digital infrastructure (to track and monitor abusive and sexual behaviour) are making children even more vulnerable.

Advocate Salma Ali, currently the president of the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) and former president of Action Against

backgrounds. She, like others, asserts that we cannot establish justice if the crime is unaddressed and the criminals are not punished. Organised gangs are still out of reach and punishment.

Cybercrime prevention units in Bangladesh's police force lack urgent action; their investigation skills are very limited compared to the number of cases reported yearly.

Reports suggest that there are only seven cyber tribunals in the country that manage such cases. They are not even well-equipped in terms of technical knowledge and infrastructure, especially for handling matters related to children. Even the new Cyber Security Act does not have any specific provisions regarding children, who are often victims of online violence, pornography or other exploitation.

The following months will prove crucial in the political history of Bangladesh. And with the academic year closing in, this will perhaps mean more reliance on online classes. Hence, all concerned authorities must urgently take steps to ensure a safer online space for children.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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47	Insertion sign
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55	Compel
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