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Chat-room cons 'net' runaway brides

HUNED CONTRACTOR
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SHONA (name changed) is the youngest of four sisters. Belonging to an upper middle-class family, her main concern, at the age of 32, was to find herself a suitable match. She, therefore, started surfing the various matrimonial web sites on the internet which gradually led to chatting with a 48-year-old Chennai-based industrialist who promised her a "job and a good life" if she would agree to run away from home. Shona left home on September 10 at 5 pm with her clothes hidden in a shopping bag and boarded the Mumbai-Chennai Express at 6.30 pm. Her family members, frantic with her having not returned home till 11 pm, lodged a First Information Report with the police, but withdrew it upon realising that it would take a

long time for the cops to swing into action. They then contacted private eye Col V K Bhalla, branch advisor of Globe Detective Agency, who quickly went through the girl's personal belongings at home to find a clue. It was Col Bhalla's lucky day for he chanced upon a ticket to Chennai booked for a date in February that had not been used.

Assuming that the girl would have boarded the evening train to Chennai, Col Bhalla used his networking with the railway staff to check the reservation charts and found Shona's name on the list. He then informed his Chennai office to keep a surveillance force on the standby. "With the help of a photograph that was emailed to them, we

located the girl on the train itself after our team boarded the train at Arnokkaam which arrives one hour and 10 minutes before Chennai. We then followed her to see the person who had promised to give her a job," reveals Col Bhalla. Today, Shona is back home and her family is not going to allow her to visit a cyber cafe for a long time to come.

Shona's case is no longer a rarity. As Narendra Kulkarni of Focus Detective Agency informs us, there has been an alarming increase in the number of incidents linked to relationships formed through internet chatting and email, especially in terms of matrimony. "We had a fraud case wherein a Muslim girl from Hyderabad agreed to

marry a Canada-based Hindu boy who claimed to be a restaurant owner with a permanent citizenship. He was to come to India for two days for the marriage but the girl's parents found this haste a mite fishy and requested our help. Quick investigations with support from the Canadian embassy proved that the boy's working visa had already expired and he was no more than a waiter in a restaurant," states Kulkarni.

Despite the growing trend of such cyber crimes, remedial or preventive measures are nowhere in sight. "We are in the process of formulating rules for cyber cafes to prevent surfing of pornographic sites. But there is nothing to stop chatting and emailing which is how a large number of cases of deception or chicanery take place," states Rohas Nagpal, director, Asian School of Cyber Laws.

huned.contractor@timesgroup.com

