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Beware! Mischief-makers online

Jhilam Karanjai

Kolkata: What if you could say anything to anyone you wanted, without having to face the consequences? You could call your boss a cheapskate, your ex-wife a Gorgon; send a note professing undying love to that beautiful colleague. This, not only with total anonymity, but better yet, in someone else's name. Yes! Impersonating someone is now really that easy. Just try 'fake mail servers'. Techie Swapan Purkait suggested that something similar could have happened with the emails supposedly sent by Kolkata Police Commissioner RK Pachnanda to his colleagues.

"There are many websites that provide fake mail servers and mail ID facilities to keep the original sender hidden. Using this particular software, a sender can use anybody's email ID and send mails to others," said Purkait, a PhD student at IIT-Kharagpur and chief executive of city-based Nettech, which provides networking security solutions.

"It is practically impossible for a layman to differentiate a fake mail from the original one. Even if the sender is tech-savvy, it is extremely difficult to pin down the server from where the mail originated," he said.

These software are available free or at a nominal cost. Talking about the

situation faced by Pachnanda, Purkait said: "The mail servers use Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP) which allows unauthenticated procedures. This means, when one is logging into a server, it does not ask for IP address or password, helping the individual to remain anonymous. Sending mails using the email ID of a public person is also quite possible."

But how does one differentiate between a fake and a genuine email? "Each email has something called a 'header'. The header generally contains the sender's IP address and the route taken by the mail. Unlike an original mail, a fake mail would never have a header."