

PRERANA'S

OPEN HOUSE MEETING

15 August 2018 | PART 1



THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY OF THE INTERNET - THE BOT IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN FROM MUMBAI'S RED-LIGHT AREAS



In the first of our two-part series on “Open House” of children in Prerana, we bring to you what children of victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking know and think about the world of internet.

Every Independence Day, children – under Prerana’s umbrella – from the red-light areas of Kamathipura, Falkland Road in Mumbai and Turbhe in Navi Mumbai gather for the keenly-awaited “Open House” discussion. This is an occasion when all the children and young adults, who have either moved out or currently receiving services under Prerana’s different programs, share their concerns, challenges, progress and are even encouraged to give suggestions and opinions on services implemented by Prerana.

This Independence Day, as part of these “Open House” discussions, the topic of internet and social media spontaneously surfaced.

It all began when we posed a very fundamental question to the children, “*Kya tumaney internet ke baare me suna hai?*” (Have you heard about internet?). Pat came the reply in a loud chorus, “*Haan bai, suna hai*” (Yes madam, we have heard of it).

Among the group of the boisterously positive respondents was a pint-sized seven-year-old. So we directed the next question at her. “What is internet,” we asked her. She replied with spontaneity, “I don’t know. You had just asked if we had heard about internet and so I raised my hand.” Everyone was left in splits.

But the discussion that ensued from here reflected the awareness among the children on internet. When we asked them how internet could be *helpful*, another round of chorus cheerfully answered, “Online shopping.” And if given a chance, these children would buy, “Neat clothes, burgers and pizzas.” “We can also sell things,” said many.

“We get information about other countries,” said Seema (name changed) shyly. An avid reader, other countries and places fascinate this young girl as she dreams of visiting India Gate in Delhi someday.

“We can hire a car” said one of the kids referring to popular Uber and Ola services that they had heard of. “*Hum khana banana seekh saktey hain*” (We can learn to cook) said another young boy. They also talked about “filling forms online” that helped them get into educational courses and institutions.

But the reply that got the most laughs and cheers came when a voice made its way within the ongoing excitement saying, “*Jeevansaathi dekh saktey hain*” (We can look for our life partners).





WORLD-WIDE 'WEB'

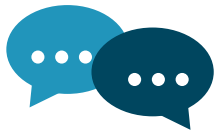
Internet becomes a web of troubles indeed if not used cautiously and judiciously. The Commission of Security and Cooperation in Europe in its report last September said that, “Children’s often unlimited and unmonitored access to the internet can also endanger them. Traffickers scout social media with fake profiles, looking for children they can extort into trafficking”. Also when the news is rife with children falling victims to popular internet games like “Blue Whale Challenge” and “Momo Challenge”, the adversities of the internet was a topic that needed to be addressed.

“One can do hacking and steal balance” said one of the children, while others said, “*Wahan par blackmailing hoti hai*” (Blackmailing takes place there).

“*Bacchon ko chor log utha saktey hain*” said a child. (Children are stolen by befriending, luring them on internet, and are often brainwashed)

The fear of abduction of children through the internet is a reflection of the persistent on ground fear the young ones in the red-light areas live with. It stems from stories they are familiar with - of boys forced to become pimps and girls coerced into practicing prostitution. And as the discussion on the adverse impact of internet continued, another child said “*Behoshi ki dawai bhi milti hai*” (Sedatives are sold there).

A tiny section among young adults giggled and spoke about “*gandi films*” (blue films) available on the internet while also referring to cyberbullying and sexting.



CHAT ON INTERNET

The careful use of social media like Facebook and Instagram, too, was discussed. The topic was raised by asking who among all the children and teenagers owned mobile phones. All eyes immediately turned to teenaged boys present there.

Since the gadget is an easily accessible mode of communication, the topic of judicious use was introduced. As most of the children possessing a mobile phone had a Facebook account, they were informed not to befriend any unknown persons on social media. They were also asked to be wary of peer pressure of following anybody unknown just because their friends follow the person.

Prerana also discussed with the children about the long-term repercussions of recklessly putting up posts online. Examples of how aspiring students were rejected by universities in the US based on undesirable Facebook posts uploaded even five years ago were cited. It was mentioned that one should not do or say anything in the virtual world – which one would not do in real life – and especially, just to impress their followers.



ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Internet has quietly crept into our everyday life– be it for communication, knowledge or networking. It has, somehow, become an inevitable necessity. And like several other conveniences of life, it is not without their positive and negative impacts.

With several cross-sections of society in India lagging behind in terms of internet penetration, one may assume that the information superhighway evades the lives of these kids too. The communities they come from lack access to basic rights, education and information. The vigorous participation by these children on a subject like the internet indicates to us that Prerana’s interventions have in some way helped give the children the access to and the ability to negotiate the larger world outside their immediate realities and communities.

For over three decades in Prerana’s effort to end intergenerational trafficking, the emphasis within Prerana is on the ‘choices’ given to the children. Prerana ensures that the children are given choices previously denied to the communities they come from – the choice of education, of self-learning, of exploring, of moving out of silos, of living lives they choose for themselves. These choices are not unlike the best aspects of the internet. And just like Prerana enables its children to avoid adversities and access the good, on ground, it strives to do so online. So our children can cope with a brave new world.

