

Why can't Manchester be called the Coimbatore of England?

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VA Shiva Ayyadurai, an American scientist of Indian origin, was in the city recently. He interacted with the students of Dr Damodaran College of Science during his visit. This techie created an outrage among the IT professionals in the US when he claimed that he was the inventor of email. And, in his interactive session with the students, he mentioned that 'Email is not my invention, it's India's invention'. Excerpts from the interview...

How does it feel to be here?

Coimbatore is an amazing city and I do not understand why we call Coimbatore the Manchester of south India. Why can't Manchester be called the Coimbatore of England? The city has a rich history in entrepreneurship and business and it is way ahead when it comes to innovation.

Tell us about your childhood...

I grew up in two different Indias — one in Muhavoor (Rajapalayam), where I didn't even have the basic facilities like water and electricity. Since I hail from a lower caste family, I had to bear the brunt of the caste system as well. I then moved to Mumbai and stayed with my grandparents. My grandmother was a Siddha healer, who learnt the therapy in Burma and she used to say what was wrong with one's health by just looking at their faces. She used to tell me a lot of bedtime stories. During my



Shiva Ayyadurai

growing up days, I was inspired by Bhagat Singh and Che Guevara. When I was seven years old, we moved to the US.

What is the actual story of email?

Back in the 70s, women were restricted to working only in certain fields — teaching, secretaryship, nursing or being a homemaker. Once I noticed that one of the secretaries at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in New Jersey had umpteen files that were piled up in front of her. They were using the inter-office system, which is very complicated. The challenge given to me was to convert the paper-based system to an electronic system. This gave birth to an electronic system called email. I patented email in 1982. It was hard for many to believe that a 14-year-old boy from Newark could invent something like this. When my mother fell ill in 2011, she said that she had safeguarded all my works, and I decided to claim my right.

What was going on in your mind when that backlash happened?

My work was supposed to be kept along with Alexander Graham Bell's telephone and Thomas Alva Edison's light bulb at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. But some were not happy. How could a dark-skinned Indian claim that he had invented the email? And thus began the insults and criticisms. Philo Farnsworth, a 14-year-old boy from Idaho invented television. He was also attacked. I

decided to fight back.

Satya Nadella and Sundar Pichai have been honored with coveted positions in top-notch companies in the US. Do you think things have changed now?

It's very difficult to compare an employer with an inventor. Some of the best brains in the country have been brainwashed and they have been made to work for their companies. But if someone claims that they have invented something, they cannot accept it.

Your marriage to actress Fran Drescher sparked some debate...

Fran and I come from working class families, and we are ordinary people. We share a common interest for art, history and music. Yes, ours was not a formal wedding; instead, we called the ceremony as a celebration of our friendship. When every little thing in your life is controlled by the government, why let the government control your marriage, too? My parents never registered their marriage either.

How is Shiva Ayyadurai as a person?

I am an artist at heart and a yogi. I can meditate for hours and I choose not to participate in the outer world. I love solitude, and I spend a lot of time with myself. In fact, Fran and I have two apartments, which are situated next to each other in New York and we usually spend some time apart whenever needed.