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'This curry stained Indian should be beaten and hanged': Shiva Ayyadurai on inventing email and the backlash that followed

Rakhi Chakraborty | February 27, 2015 at 8:15 am

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I first heard of Shiva Ayyadurai while randomly scrolling through Facebook. A news article from Huffington Post appeared on my newsfeed, mentioning Shiva Ayyadurai as the inventor of email and honouring him for his achievements on the thirtieth anniversary of email. A quick google search produced another interesting piece, again from Huffington Post, which stated how two big American corporations-Raytheon and BBN- ran a sustained PR campaign to discredit and malign the brown teenager from Newark, New Jersey who was the true inventor of email.

> IF AN INDIAN DOES GREAT SOFTWARE CODING, OUTSOURCING OR IS THE CHAIRMAN OF MICROSOFT, THEN THAT'S COOL. BUT AN INDIAN CANNOT BE AN INNOVATOR. I AM LABELLED A FRAUD

VA SHIVA AYYADURAI

In postcolonial India where we are quick to claim and glorify the slightest recognition from the West, I was baffled at how I had not come across his name before; especially given the magnitude of this achievement. For Ayyadurai allegedly invented email when he was only fourteen. The rest of his life is glittery with a vast array of entrepreneurial achievements (uncontested ones) from earning four degrees at MIT to founding Echo Mail, revamping the US Postal system and many more.

I saved both the articles to Pocket and forgot about them for a few days. When I tried to read them later, they weren't to be found. An exhaustive search around the internet later I learnt that all the pieces hailing Ayyadurai as the inventor of email were taken down after a flurry of readers protested this to be categorically false. That honour instead went to American inventor Ray Tomlinson. Any search for Shiva Ayyadurai yielded three kinds of results:his recent marriage to Hollywood actress Fran Drescher, torrents of racial and other abuse deeming him to be a liar and a fraud and Ayyadurai's own slew of registered domains.

It was difficult to gauge the authenticity of his claims from either the trolls or his own websites. Confused, I reached out to him for an interview and he obliged. But a lengthy conversation later, my confusion has not abated much. Rather than endorsing or criticizing his claims (which this author anyway has no authority to do), this interview is an attempt at opening up legitimate avenues of conversation where we can discuss, critique and opine coherently and with dignity- something the American media has largely failed to do and our Indian brethren have not expressed much interest in either. He says, "The main contention against me is that I am a self-promotional businessman. I am an internet entrepreneur. What does that have to do with the material facts of who invented email?"

We welcome your thoughts in the comments below. Please note that here we discuss only the contentious email issue. A more comprehensive conversation on his life, education and other achievements is forthcoming next week.

You were close to dropping out of school when your mother introduced you to Les Michelson (scientist at University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, under whose tutelage Shiva says he invented the email.)

Yes. I was fourteen years old at the time.

What was going on your mind when you were fourteen?

In India I came from a family of farmers. My grandmother was a farmer. My mother, despite coming from an 'untouchable' lower caste family, worked impossibly hard to educate herself. My father grew up in the war and did not learn to read or write till he turned eleven. When we moved to the United States in 1970 at the age of seven I was keen to do well. Every time I went to India I realized how fortunate I was to have been given the opportunities I had, especially given where I came from. I knew I was not doing well for me but for so many who had sacrificed so I could be here. From then on I was motivated to change the world.

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Imagine the world in 1978. No PC's, no smartphones and no laptops. The ordinary person did not have access to the computer. Those who got to use it were highly technical people- system analysts, programmers, etc. and they too used it only for data processing.

For me email was not a technical person sending another technical person a message. It was the entire system and it was designed for the ordinary end user. A doctor, a dentist or a secretary. So they would move from a typewriter to the computer terminal. That was what made email revolutionary.

Before Steve Jobs created the computer, people had to build their own computers. They had to buy the parts separately and assemble it. That's what made the Mackintosh revolutionary. It was accessible to millions of people. Email made the computer accessible to millions of people and that's what I invented.

How did you come upon the idea?

The idea was to make communication accessible for the ordinary end user. It was not just making text messaging accessible. That's what they were doing. We had about a hundred different features. You see a secretary would not move to email unless it had all the features she was used to. She was used to seeing an inbox, outbox, address book and a trash folder. She was used to getting a return receipt. All these features needed to be interconnected. Email is a system of interconnected parts. It was like creating an engine.

One of the most common criticisms levelled against you is that you don't acknowledge that your invention was built on the works of those who came before you in the sixties, especially individuals like Ray Tomlinson and organizations like ARPANET. How much of inventing the Email was original and what was based on prior works?

You have to understand the politics at work here. Over here is the military, the private industry and academia. What they were doing in the sixties and the seventies was trying to send a message from Point A to Point B for soldiers in the battle field. In 1978, at the age of fourteen, I had no access to that technology, did not use any of their parts. And this is what needs to be brought out. We didn't need any of their stuff to bring out the Email. We didn't even need the internet.

The early email systems, from the one I built to all the way up to 1993 and you can read up on the facts yourself, did not use the internet. They were built around local area networks. In one office we literally ran ether net cords and set up our computers. We were not using their networks and protocols at all.

They want the world to think that you need the military. That the military industrial complex creates great technologies. The reason there is so much anger and backlash is because we, as a public, have been taught to believe that our tax dollars fund the defence department. The defence department does research and once in a while we get GPS. We get Velcro. We get email. It's a way of justifying all this spending on the military.

In 1978 I did not use even a single of their components. I didn't need it.

Philo Farnsworth, a fourteen year old boy from a small town in Idaho, invented the television. They attacked him just as viciously. We are changing the narrative here. What we are saying is that a small kid from India or Idaho could invent life changing things. We don't have to spend billions funding the military. The military industrial complex has convinced us that we should fund them because they are the big innovators. Only a white man could create something like that. A dark skinned kid in Newark, New Jersey-the thought of him creating the email is like an explosion to these people. That's why they have to pull down articles. You go my Wikipedia page and run through the list of previously published articles discussing my works and achievements. All the links have been destroyed. I have been a scientist and an inventor for forty years of my life. The idea is to not only destroy the accurate account of events but also to destroy me.

The reason is not about me. It is about preserving that military industrial complex where we go kill people in the Middle East and bomb people and because of them great innovations come. It's not true. The email was invented through collaboration. But it was not of the military but through the collaboration of good teachers, my parents, Michaelson and the support of a small local environment. And that is revolutionary. If people know that the email and television were created by fourteen year old kids, then they realize they don't need to spend enormous sums backing the military. And that's what they are afraid of.
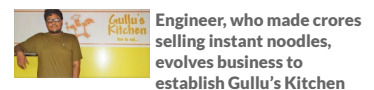
Huffington Post ran an article about myths surrounding the invention of email that has since been taken down. For purposes of posterity, can you give a rundown of some of those myths?

The first myth was that the ARPANET created email. Absolutely false. What they did was electronic text messaging. The ARPANET was working on battlefield communications via telegraph. It was a very rudimentary system. David Crocker himself, in December 1977, wrote an article saying, "No attempt is being made to emulate a full-scale, inter-organizational mail system."

The second myth was that Ray Tomlinson invented email and that he sent the first email message. Ray Tomlinson did not write fifty thousand lines of code. He wrote may be fifteen twenty lines of code. He took an old program, manipulated it a little bit and he used the '@' symbol to designate two computers. That's not email. That's not inbox outbox folders. But BBN and Raytheon launched a massive PR campaign to discredit my work. They wanted to build their brand. Being known as the inventors of email would give them tremendous advantage towards winning billions of dollars of security contract.

The frankly racist articles put up at Gizmodo and Techdirt claim that RFCs were emails. RFC's are meeting notes. It meant Request for Comment. In those days you had a meeting, a bunch of guys were at the table and they would write out the meeting notes. They would send the meeting notes to everyone involved. RFCs are not a computer program. They are not any type of a specification for user interface.

It's also claimed that the CTSS was email. CTSS was the system that was developed at MIT and it was essentially an early blog or wall post at best. They called it mail because in those days they would have a file and you could tack on another post to it. That's not email. Email by definition (I am the one who defined it, I am the one who came up with the word and I am the one who created it) is a system of interlocking parts- inbox, outbox, folders and all those
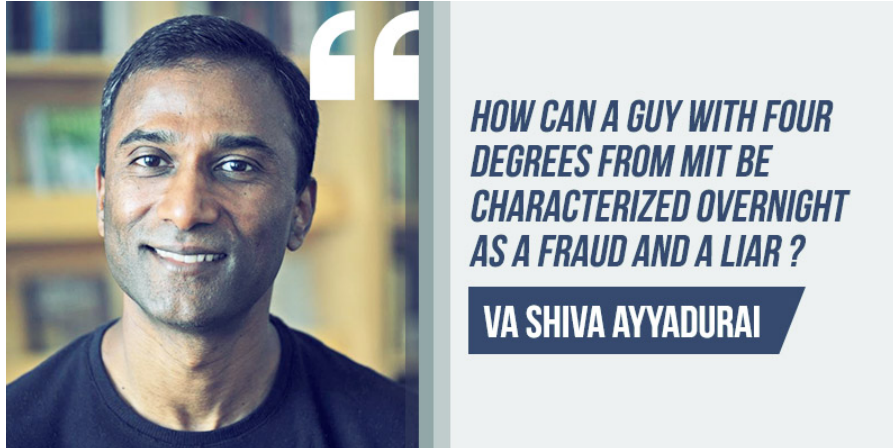
It was in 2012, after Washington Post carried an article about your work being honoured by the Smithsonian, that the avalanche of backlash begun and peaked. Can you elaborate on that?

Everyone attacks India to be the most corrupt country in the world. But it has nothing on American corruption. Here it is deep, entrenched and done in a very sophisticated manner.

The article in Washington Post was written by a young black reporter. She started getting trolled within an hour of the piece being published. She called me up and said that my editor has thrown me under the bus and asked me to write a rebuttal against two people who were leading the backlash against me- one was a historian in the pocket of Raytheon. I chose to co-write my rebuttal with Noam Chomsky.

> ## HOW CAN A GUY WITH FOUR DEGREES FROM MIT BE CHARACTERIZED OVERNIGHT AS A FRAUD AND A LIAR ?
> ### VA SHIVA AYYADURAI

When they finally ran the article, they only went with David Crocker. Even then, they didn't deny that I invented email. They said that electronic messaging existed before I came along. I am not saying I invented electronic messaging. Its existence goes back to the time of Morse code. But I did create email.

Within seven days of the Washington Post article going live, they created an internet hall of fame and gave an award to Ray Tomlinson for creating the email. This is how the system works.

Raytheon's stock went up by $1 immediately after this announcement. There was a renewed flurry of hate campaigning against me. One blog said, "This curry stained Indian should be beaten and hanged." If an Indian does great software coding, outsourcing or is the chairman of Microsoft, then that's cool. But an Indian cannot be an innovator. I am labelled a fraud. Wikipedia calls me a scoundrel, a conman and a liar.

When you patented EMAIL in 1982, there was little distinction between a copyright and a patent. When it collapsed 14 years later, in 1996, why didn't you renew it?

1980 was when the copyright act was converted to support software rights. In 1981 I was sixteen and not aware of the complexities and politics at play. I couldn't afford a lawyer and so did all the paperwork on my own. It was only in the early 1990's that the Supreme Court began recognizing software patents. I couldn't file for my patent then because you can't patent something that's already been disclosed.

Do you grudge being denied prospective profits as a consequence of this patent issue not working out?

Walter Issacson's new book 'Innovators', a book featuring solely white inventors, says that true innovation happens when the government, military and academia work together. Issacson says that the biggest motive for innovation is profit. The concept of money being the sole motive for innovation is bullshit. It is an idea promoted by those in power in order to manipulate humanity.

Today my fight is no longer about who invented email. The facts are in black and white and your readers are free to make an informed choice. I am more concerned with who controls innovation and how is humanity going to move forward.

[This interview has been edited and condensed]

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Sufiya Pathan · Sophia College for Women
Great piece Rakhi Chakraborty! At the end of the day it isn't getting his name in a history book that will do any good to the world, but if the fight he leads will inspire others to join...we can finally change history!
Reply · Like · 👍 14 · February 27 at 1:59am

Anirudh Mehra · M.D. at Business
I can't tell you that how amazed I am after reading this article. Never knew that corruption or dirty politics are not bounded. Well, Mr. Shiva Ayyadurai, I second you on the concern that you have raised & it irks me that you are not the only one who has been denied the credit & prospects of an innovation or in some cases the only innovation a person has given its life too, because not everyday you invent something new. For me, you deserve all the laurels & credits for you revolutionary innovation.
Reply · Like · 👍 8 · Edited · February 26 at 11:50pm

Jugunu Singh
Who controls innovation?????

My Answer is those who never invent anything- Govt. and Powerful Corporate Houses.
Reply · Like · 👍 5 · February 27 at 1:33am

Vijeeth Shetty · ⭐ Top Commenter · Business Director - Interaction (Digital) at GroupM ESP · 136 followers
This is certainly the most enlightening piece of information that I've read for the longest time. This article deserves to be shared more than those irrelevant 'schoopwhoop' articles (not demeaning scoopwhoop in any way here)

We are proud of you Mr. Ayyadurai. Hats off to you for what you've done in life. And Rakhi Chakraborthy, you got a fan.
Reply · Like · 👍 4 · February 27 at 10:11am

Shalabh Tayal · Indore, India
every 'brown at heart' Indian must read this article !
Reply · Like · 👍 4 · February 26 at 11:27pm

Aniruddha Bohra
Unfortunately, this is not just the case with technology, but we're deprived of several other credits which needless to say belong to us.
Metaproteomics had filed a patent application at the Canadian Intellectual Property Office. The patent title "Curcuminoid compositions exhibiting synergistic inhibition of the expression and/ or activity of Cyclooxygenase-2" claimed the usefulness of turmeric, apple, basil, kalamegha and licorice for the treatment of inflammation, psoriasis, gastritis and as anti-inflammatory to be novel.
Turmeric (haldi) is an Indian discovery, and cannot be patented.
The claims were challenged by the Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research in March 1995. Earlier attempts to challenge the patenting of the medicinal properties of neem had failed, leading to suspicion of US laws and the US policy on intellectual property rights.
Sadly, we don't have a well-defined framework, apt infrastructure and necessary legal support to counter such claims judiciously.
Reply · Like · 👍 1 · April 27 at 1:29pm

Steve Brorens · University of Canterbury
What needs to be asked is what influence did Shiva's "EMAIL" system have? The answer is none. The email that you and I use today is completely based on the RFCs, and the work of Tomlinson etc.

No-one doubts that Shiva created a nice email system at UMDNJ, and that's certainly a massive acheivement for anyone, let alone a 14 year old, but it didn't grow to become the email we have today, and in fact there's no evidence that anyone outside of UMDNJ was aware that it ever existed.

When he gave the Smithsonian his EMAIL archives that was great, a little piece of history.

What has driven the outrage is simply Shiva's outrageous claims.
Reply · Like · 👍 3 · February 27 at 2:01pm

> **संदीप शेळके** · Developer at Roxar AS · 214 followers
> And what is that 'outrageous claim' Steve?
> Reply · Like · March 2 at 10:06am

> **Anurag Nandigama** · Siddhartha Institute of Technology & Sciences
> Dear Steve! The ones (email systems) which we have now are more sophisticated & yeah definitely Tomlinson had made great contribution. But that doesn't rule out the fact that Shiva Ayyadurai had laid the foundation for everyone. I believe that's just innovation. Going by the way you say it appears that the invention of aeroplane is made by BOEING company because 'it is more sophisticated' (for the record Shivkar Talpade invented it & flew it way back in 1895)
> Reply · Like · 👍 14 · March 4 at 1:25pm

> > **Sidharth Sen** · Graduate Research Assistant at Mizzou Animal Science
> > Anurag Nandigama Shivkar Talpade was supposedly the first man to fly an unmanned airplane ....honestly there were a lot of innovative people around the world at that time trying to do that !..... Wright brothers did the first recorded manned flight.
> > Reply · Like · 👍 1 · Edited · March 4 at 7:15am

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-
Why this has to be mentioned in such way?
Reply · Like · May 8 at 10:40pm

Sunanda Tewari · Volunteer at Make A Difference
Proof read your article. Please.
Reply · Like · 👍 2 · February 27 at 12:58am

> **Rakhi Chakraborty** · Journalist at YourStory
> It has been, extensively. Can you elaborate?
> Reply · Like · 👍 4 · February 27 at 1:24am

> > **Bala Abhinav** · Chief Executive Officer at Styledekh.com
> > Rakhi Chakraborty Proof read it "She called me up and said that my editor has thrown be under and the bus and asked me to write a rebuttal against two people" ..there was another glitch as well in the initial part..kindly check up..
> > Reply · Like · 👍 1 · March 4 at 2:14am

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