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Mumbai Mirror | Mar 15, 2014, 11.48 PM IST

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Anoo Bhuyan

Small Talk: Dr Va Shiva Ayyadurai

The man behind a technological invention none of us can live without, on thinking it up at 14 and fighting to own it.

Dr VA Shiva Ayyadurai says he invented email as a 14-year-old, and got free lunch to do it. As a young teenager, getting bored with school in Newark, New Jersey, where he had already learnt calculus by the age of 13, Shiva wanted to drop out and pursue art and carpentry instead. His mother introduced him to Dr Leslie Michelson at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in New Jersey, who offered him a job - to study the inter office paper-based mail system used at the college and find an electronic version for it. "I had freedom, respect, mentoring, a supportive family and good teachers," says the 50-year-old during a visit to New Delhi last week. "This was the ecosystem that enabled the email."

For many weeks, the teenager went around the college office, making notes like a "little anthropologist". He noted that a lot of office communication was run on the basis of memos which the secretaries chalked up. "Anyone over the age of 40 will remember that all establishments, from the president to business owners,

had this system of communication. If the secretary needed to make more than five copies of a document, the carbon paper in a typewriter wouldn't work. She'd have to re-type it," he explains.

Shiva wrote up an inventory of components used in the system of sending memos, such as the Inbox, Outbox, Drafts, Trash, To and From, Date, Subject, Cc, Bcc, Forward and Address Book. He then worked for the next many months to create an electronic system to mimic this physical one, and in 1978, wrote 50,000 lines of code to create a program he named 'EMAIL'. In 1982, Shiva successfully got 'EMAIL' copyrighted by the United States Copyright Office. He now held the name as well as the invention to one of the most dominating aspects of our lives. This initial inventory along with other documents has been preserved in the Smithsonian Museum since 2012.

The precocious teenager prophesied the impact of his invention in 1981, comparing it to Edison's light bulb: "One day electronic mail, like Edison's light bulb, may also permeate and pervade our daily lives", and this might "create different patterns of communication, attitudes, and styles."

Nearly 32 years later, we meet Shiva, and appropriately enough, it is on the 25th birthday of the Internet as created by Tim Berners-Lee. Dressed in a smart grey suit over a mauve shirt, Shiva could pass off for being 10 years younger than he is. Time doesn't seem proportionate with achievement for this scientist technologist with four degrees from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (he says he didn't even know of MIT, and was forced into applying) and several patents. He also owns and runs a range of successful corporate enterprises.

Shiva pronounces his name as 'Sheeva', with an accent that belongs to his American citizenship. "I live in several worlds. I grew up in Bombay which is like a big bazaar. But I also spent time in my grandmother's village of Muhavur in Tamil Nadu. And then, I moved to New Jersey in 1970 when I was seven." He now straddles the real and virtual, and engages in extensive research in Indian medical science.

Shiva identifies heavily with Philo Farnsworth, credited by many as the inventor of the television when he too was 14. "I don't want to wait 60 years to have my status as the inventor accepted, like he did," he says, referring to the controversy over his assertion as the inventor of email.

Soon after the fame that came with Shiva's documents being accepted at Smithsonian, a campaign of criticism broke out. "I don't need that validation to who I am," he says of his detractors. Yet, his new book published by Perseus, *The Email Revolution: Unleashing the Power to Connect* is written quite as a defense of him and his work. Several people cite Ray Tomlinson as the inventor of the email. Shiva maintains that he coined the term, and defined it as the inter-office electronic mail exchange system which he created, thus making him the inventor. He banks on endorsement by Noam Chomsky, fellow MIT professor of international repute. "Innovation must not be monopolized by those with power," says Chomsky on Shiva's journey.

His mother, Meenakshi is significant to him, evident from the number of times he fondly recalls her in the conversation. She was the one to get him to apply for an intense course when he was too young to sign up for it. This is where he learnt FORTRAN - the computer language he used to code his 1982 invention. And it was she who encouraged him to fight when attackers launched a denial of the invention.

Shiva speaks of how history and innovation should not be owned by anyone. He sees his story as a challenge to the narrative of innovation. "Innovation can occur anytime and anywhere. Yes, it occurs in MIT, but it can also occur to 14-year-old boys like me and Philo." He hopes to recreate the right "ecosystem" that he enjoyed, through his organisation, Innovation Corps which has plans to help six teenagers from India develop their idea into a business. "You shouldn't be surprised that a kid invented email. I think I am in a position to change that narrative," he says.

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