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Forgotten email patent holder pings Chennai Came Up With The Idea When He Was 14

Karthikeyan Hemalatha | TNN

Chennai: He has a patent for email and is fighting to be recognized for it. Shiva Ayyadurai of Tamil Nadu, who now lives in the US, got a patent for email in 1982 but his greatest innovation has never got him attention.

“Much of the email we use today is based on what I foresaw in 1978. However, the US will not allow an Indian, especially someone who was living in Newark, one of the poorest cities there, to get credit for it,” said Ayyadurai, who was in the city on Wednesday.

A triple degree holder from MIT, Ayyadurai addressed students of Sathyabama University on promotion of innovation to ensure the creation of 1.8 billion jobs. “Jobs cannot be created if innovation is restricted to large corporates. Even students from rural India may have bright ideas. They need to be tapped,” said Ayyadurai, who is the founder, chairman and CEO of Cytosolve, a technology and healthcare company.

He says all components of email —inbox, outbox, drafts, memo, attachments, folders and compose



Shiva Ayyadurai (first from right) at Sathyabama University on Wednesday

— are systems he invented. “These are components I saw as a 14-year old and used them to build the system. Much of these features are in use now,” he said .

Ayyadurai says he was 14 when he developed email. “It was the electronic form of an inter-office mail system. I gave it the name ‘EMAIL’ in 1978. There were no patent laws back then, but I got a copyright protection the same way a writer or musician would,” he said. He defines email as the ‘electronic emulation of the inter-office/ organization of the paper based mail system’.

His critics, however, point out that electronic messaging predates his work and that this copyright only identifies

him as “the creator of a computer programme for an electronic mailsystem.” He counters: “A quick search through the US Copyright Office’s website will show that email was first used in 1979 and has been registered under Shiva Ayyadurai,” he said.

Political critic and writer Noam Chomsky has given his support. “Given the term email was not used prior to 1978, and there was no intention to emulate... a full-scale, inter-organizational mailsystem as late as December 1977, there is no controversy here, except the one created by industry insiders, who have a vested interest,” Chomsky said in a public statement.