

INDIAN BOY WHO INVENTED EMAIL

Even the best brains in computer and software engineering may not be able to answer if you ask them who invented email. This was illustrated on Sunday when this writer checked the same with Prof. Achuthsankar S. Nair, Director, State Inter-University Centre of Excellence in Bioinformatics, Government of Kerala and Dr. Iyemperumal, Executive Director, Tamil Nadu State Science and Technology Centre. Both of them expressed their helplessness even though both of them handle hundreds of email messages per day.

It is a 14-year-old boy from India and that, too, with roots in Tamil Nadu who invented email as well as the five-letter word which has become synonymous with communication.

V A Shiva Ayyadurai, hardly out of school in New Jersey, ushered in the paperless era into this world. It was in response to a challenge thrown at him by Dr. Leslie P Michelson, Director, High Performance Computing Lab, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ), in Newark, New Jersey, which made little Shiva create the world's first email system in November 1978.

“The UMDNJ was a big campus connected by a wide area computer network. The computer was in its initial stages of being used in the office environment. Dr. Michelson wanted me to create an electronic version of the interoffice mail system so that the entire staff of doctors, secretaries, students and staff could communicate faster.

At that time, secretaries and staff were performing drafting, typing, copying, hand delivering of the entire paper-based mail. By observing the interoffice mail system, I created a parts list: Inbox, Outbox, Memo, Folders, Address Book, Attachments, and then created a computer programme of nearly 50,000 lines of computer code which replicated this entire system.

I called my innovation ‘email,’ a term that had never been used before. The world’s first email I sent was to Dr. Michelson in November 1978,” Dr. Ayyadurai told The Pioneer on Sunday. Dr. Ayyadurai developed email as a software programme.

“Software itself was a new concept then. In 1978, it was not even covered under the Intellectual Property Rights. The US Copyright Law of 1976 was amended, however, in 1980, to allow for the protection of software.

In 1982, I was awarded the first US Copyright for ‘Email,’ recognizing me as the inventor of email by the US Government,” said Dr. Ayyadurai, who holds four different Post Graduate degrees including a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“What you see in any email system today, the Inbox, Outbox, Address Book, the Memo (From, To, Date, Subject, Body, CC and BCC), Attachments, etc. are based on my observations to replicate the interoffice mail system.

In November 1978, as a 14-year-old school boy, I addressed the doctors of the University on what I invented and demonstrated the use of this entire system, ” reminiscences Dr. Ayyadurai, son of Vellayappa Ayyadurai, a chemical engineer hailing from Rajapalayam in Tamil Nadu and Meenakshi, a mathematics teacher who went on to become the head of the elite Don Bosco Public School in Mumbai.

The Ayyadurais migrated to the USA in 1970 in search of greater challenges so that little Shiva could get better education and exposure. He did not let his parents down.

By the age of 13 he had mastered all known computer programming languages in vogue and went on to create email, which revolutionized the world of communication.

Dr Ayyadurai has come out with a book 'The Email Revolution: Unleashing The Power of Connect' which has foreword by Dr. Leslie Michelson and an introduction by none other than Prof. Noam Chomsky. He is in India as part of his mission to identify more “Shivas” who have much better innovations to offer to the world.

“Young people of all colors, hungry to make this world a better place, are going to innovate things we’ve never imagined. We have to provide more global images to young people. In India, for example, with icons, beyond just white skinned and white haired, bearded scientists,” said Dr Ayyadurai.

And how many of us is aware of the fact that radio was invented by Prof. Jagdish Chandra Bose! It was his failure to get it patented that cost Dr. Bose the title.

Marconi, who had seen Dr. Bose’ public demonstration of the radio, had approached him with an irresistible offer to market the same. But, Dr. Bose wanted the radio to be used for the welfare of the humanity.

The night he held the public demonstration, his equipment was robbed from his hotel room. The rest is history,” Prof Ranjit Nair, leading physicist, had told this writer.

So, today we all think Marconi, an Italian, invented Radio.

But, when it comes to email, it's time to set the record straight, once and for all — it was a boy, a 14-year-old Indian boy, who invented email. The facts are in black and white.