

Code Crimson

Chidanand Rajghatta goes behind the story of Facebook to talk to the Indian brain behind the social networking idea

The Indian Visage Behind Facebook

"Who's the Indian in that Facebook movie?" the question rippled across techie twitterfeeds and desi blogs last month as *The Social Network*, a quasi-biopic about the folks behind the site that's launched a million quips – and an odd litigation or two -- hit the screens across America. The character's name helped little; and the actor who played the role, not at all. Divya Narendra sounded distinctly Indian, but it was an unusual combination for a guy. It didn't say if he was an FoB or ABCD or PIO; it also masked his Indian geography. When the credits rolled by, one caught that his role, as one of the social networking pioneers and a putative originator of Facebook, was played by Max Minghella, son of the director Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient*; *Cold Mountain*; *The Talented Mr. Ripley*).

Well, the casting question is still reverberating among those who kvetch about issues of racial and ethnic discrimination, real or perceived ("What Happened to All the South Asians in Hollywood?" one blog asked). But Divya, second generation Indian-American, has other concerns. In fact, he thought Max did a pretty good job in the role that highlighted the fact that he was the originator of the social networking concept. The role includes delivering the stand-out line to Mark Zuckerberg ("I can't wait to stand over your shoulder while you write us a check"). The central storyline of the movie is that Zuckerberg, lately a much vaunted prodigy, gazillionaire, and sultan of social networking, may actually have pinched the Facebook idea from Divya and the Winklevoss twins, who were decidedly ahead of the curve in the mad dash to fame and billionairehood.

As it turned out, Zuckerberg is now officially credited with being the founder of Facebook, but not before a settlement with Divya and the Winklevosses. A check was indeed written (reportedly for \$ 65 million) but the saga is far from over. The trumped out trio is trying to get out of the settlement. "Without getting too technical, the reason we are trying to get out of the settlement is that we believe that Facebook failed to disclose to us highly material information regarding the value of their stock despite having a clear obligation to do so," Divya explained in an e-mail exchange with this correspondent.

But all that's getting ahead of the story, which begins in December 2002, when Divya, a junior, comes up with an idea to create an online community for Harvard. Son of Indian immigrant professionals (his parents are both doctors, a pediatrician mother from Delhi and an internist father from Chennai) he lacks the nous for business, so he asks classmates, the Winklevoss brothers, Tyler and Cameron, waspy, east coast elites, to help him.

They are unusual partners. For all his latterly upper class Indian upbringing, Divya, who was born in Bronx and grew up in Queens, has had to fight his way to Harvard through the public school system. The Winklevosses are the privileged ones. But they end living up in Pforzheimer

House in Harvard, where they quickly discovered something that bound them – music. binds them. The one thing that binds them is music. "Cameron, like myself, enjoyed playing guitar," says Divya. "He used to joke that I "electrified" his playing (as he used to primarily play the acoustic)."

But they now have a greater calling in the social networking idea. In January 2003, they enlist fellow Harvard student, programmer and friend Sanjay Mavinkurve to begin building what they call the HarvardConnection. But Sanjay graduates in spring that year and dumps the project to go and work for Google, so they go to Victor Gao, another programming student, who also leaves after a short stint.

Enter Zuckerberg. The way Divya recalls it, Zuckerberg was a sophomore at the time and the brother of one of his classmates "alerted us of his abilities and entrepreneurial interests." By this time though, the HarvardConnection is already ramped up with a large chunk of code done by previous programmers: front-end pages, the registration system, a database, back-end coding, and a way users could connect with each other. "We're very deep into developing a site which we would like you to be a part of and ... which we know will make some waves on campus," Divya writes to Zuckerberg in November that year.

The trio then meets Zuckerberg and explain their concept to him, including plans to expand to other schools and the importance of secrecy and a rapid roll out. Zuckerberg, according to Divya, comes on board as a partner, and is given a private server location and password for the unfinished HarvardConnection website and code, with the understanding that he would finish the programming necessary for launch.

The rest is history for Zuckerberg – and hysteria for the trio. According to the litigants, Zuckerberg gave them the run around for the next several weeks, making repeated excuses for not finishing the coding, even as he worked simultaneously on a similar project without telling them. In January 2004, he registered the domain name thefacebook.com, and on February 4, rolled out the website, all the while telling his trio of partners that he was still working on Harvard connection.

Divya and the Winklevosses first learned of the new site in the campus newspaper Harvard Crimson. To say they saw red would be an understatement. In a world where first-mover advantage defines the winner from also-ran and forgotten, they sent a cease and desist letter to Zuckerberg even as they rushed to the Harvard administration for intervention, saying if nothing else, he had violated the university's honor code and student handbook. But University President Larry Summers ruled the matter was outside his jurisdiction and advised them to take the matter to court, where it is now being fought.

Divya though is not counting on another settlement or resting on the paltry millions from the first one. At 28, he's a tough cookie; born in Bronx, growing up in Queens, he could be a scrapper, but bitterness is not part of his make-up. Amid the tangle of lawsuits and the now the frenzy of discovery (as the Facebook's hidden face) he is busy growing his new company SumZero, which he describes as the largest online community of buyside analysts in the world with over 4,100

analysts and PMs as members. Every major hedge fund, mutual fund, and private equity fund is represented in SumZero's membership. "We are trying to further the philosophy that investing does not have to be a zero sum game. By sharing their thoughts with like-minded peers, we believe that investors can create win-win situations for themselves, whereby they gain not only financially, but also by growing their professional networks," he explains.

And he's doing all this while pursuing an MBA at Kellogg School of Management (and commuting to Boston and New York to pursue his real business). His only brother Varun is a MD-PhD candidate at New York University. Clearly, for the Narendras, there's life beyond Facebook and its founding, even now.