

NEEVA

Challenging the Google way in search

A new search engine is offering 'a private, ad-free experience with only real results', but for a price

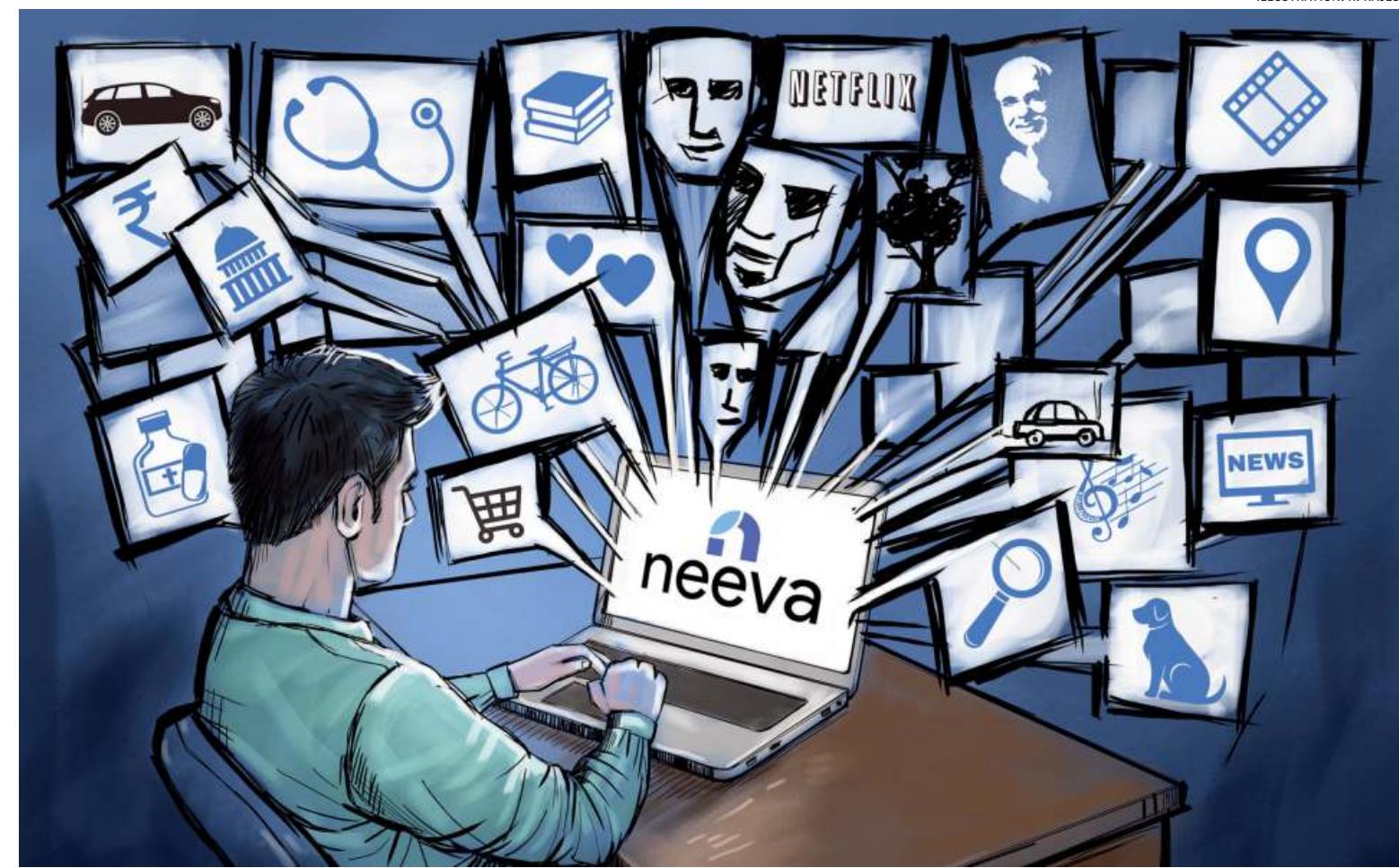
SRIRAM SRINIVASAN

Twenty-three years ago, Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page presented the idea of Google in their research paper, 'The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine', optimistically concluding that "there is a bright future for search". They couldn't have been more prophetic. Google has, over the years, built its massive empire, thanks to the continuing success of its search engine.

It has been so successful that its brand name is synonymous with the word "search", worryingly so for the company. Its rivals have been few and far. And don't forget the commercial success – last year, Google made revenues of over \$100 billion just from its search operation. It is in this Google-dominated universe that newcomer Neeva sees an opportunity. Just a few days ago, Neeva made its search engine available for users in the United States, promising them "a private, ad-free search experience with only real results". Users who sign up get three months of free access, after which they have to pay \$4.95 every month.

There has also been a buzz around Neeva for it being the story of two ex-Googlers, Sridhar Ramaswamy and Vivek Raghunathan, challenging Google in its core business. Mr. Ramaswamy, a former senior vice-president of ads at Google, was part of the team that built Google Search in the early years. Mr. Raghunathan is a former vice-president of monetisation at YouTube. They are both IIT alumni.

So, what opportunity did they sense in a marketplace where Google is near-ubiquitous? Mr. Ramaswamy made this clear in his very first blog for Neeva about a year ago. Google "entered with a new approach to searching – namely, by ranking web pages on the basis of the number of links to those pages and, eventually, by supporting itself with advertising," says author Shane Greenstein in the book, *How the Internet Became Commercial*. Like many other internet services, search has almost always been free for users. In 2008, it was in explaining this business strategy that Chris Anderson wrote the book *Free*:



Instead of adopting the Google model, which has built an empire, Neeva promises to fix the search experience and seeks to build a subscription model

The Future of a Radical Price. Neeva isn't going that way. It has come into being at a time when subscription models are much more in vogue in the broad digital world. In an interview to business magazine *Fast Company*, Mr. Ramaswamy says, "I tell people that Neeva is as much a social experiment as it is a technological experiment." He adds, "If there was a high-quality product that clearly benefits you in multiple ways, would you pay for it as

opposed to having it be free, supported by ads?"

Last year, in one of his blog posts, he weighed in on the question of price. He wrote: "We will start at a reasonable price, say the cost of two black coffees a month. We hope that over time, we will be able to reduce the price as we become more efficient. Everything that we take for granted (our computers and phones, even ice cream) started out at a higher price point before scale and innovation made them available to everyone."

New challengers

Neeva isn't alone in seeing an opportunity in search. Just a few days before Neeva's announcement, Brave Browser announced the beta version of its Search tool – offering users the first independent privacy search/browser alternative to big tech. In recent years, DuckDuckGo has been an alternative that has

emphasised privacy over other things.

Last month, it said, "Spurred by the increase in DuckDuckGo app usage, over the last 12 months, our monthly search traffic increased 55% and we grew to become the #2 search engine on mobile in many countries, including in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands". It further said: "We don't track our users so we can't say for sure how many we have, but based on market share estimates, download numbers, and national surveys, we believe there are between 70-100 million DuckDuckGo users."

Tech Crunch reported DuckDuckGo picking up another \$100 million in investment, saying, "Privacy tech continues cooking on gas."

In March this year, Neeva raised a further \$40 million in funding from Sequoia Capital, Greylock Partners and Inovia Capital. They had

raised a similar amount in an earlier round. This is a very different world compared to the initial years of Google, when it was important to not only improve the search results but also build new features. Those years saw new features such as news, shopping, videos, and maps coming in. Privacy has emerged as an important competitive element across many digital product categories.

The world has changed in another way. As David Doty wrote in a Forbes article, "People aren't just typing in a search term on whichever main search engine they prefer – they're searching and consuming in context, on YouTube, Netflix, Amazon or Pinterest and increasingly on any of a zillion specialised apps."

The point being, the search market is more fragmented than ever. And yet, as a study last year by the Competition and

Markets Authority of the U.K. pointed out, "There is a long history of search providers other than Google and Bing choosing to outsource some or all of their search engine activities." The reference is to them maintaining web indexes. It said, "The main way that they acquire information for their index is through their automated web-crawling bots. These bots follow the links between webpages and bring data about those pages back to the search engine's servers."

The *Fast Company* story says Neeva "has indexed several billion web pages on its own but also credits Apple, Bing, and Yelp at the bottom of search results; other information providers include Intrinio, Weather.com, and Xignite. Even Google is an ingredient, with Google Maps embedded in search results".

The important question now is: will users pay for search?

In Focus

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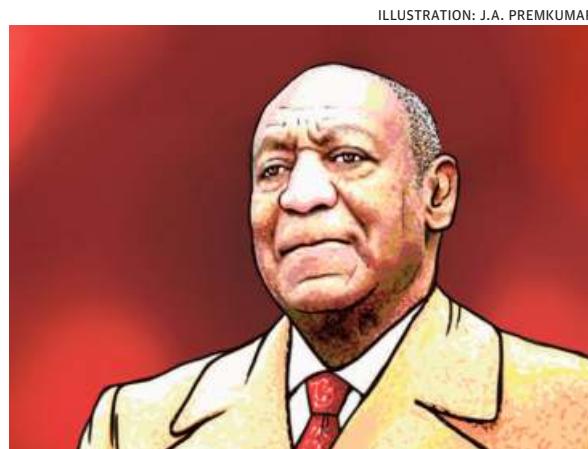
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BILL COSBY

Free from prison

The star comedian's conviction has been overturned over a legal loophole

NARAYAN LAKSHMAN



Bill Cosby (83), the man known as "America's Dad" and famed mega-star of "The Cosby Show", of the 1980s, who then fell spectacularly from grace after being convicted on sexual assault charges after more than 50 women accused him of sexual misconduct, walked free this week after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned his 2018 conviction, owing to a technicality in the trial. His release prompted an outpouring of shock and despair among his accusers and within the #MeToo movement and broader campaigns for justice for victims of sexual assault and harassment, with some describing his overturned conviction as the story of "a rich entitled man who beat the odds through good lawyering".

Cosby was born William Henry Cosby Junior, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 12, 1937, one of three children to Navy mess steward William Senior and domestic worker Anne. Although his father abandoned their family while Cosby was still a young child, he went on to have a four-year stint as a Navy medical corpsman, during which time he completed high school and secured an athletic scholarship at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Cosby performed well in sports, yet dropped out of university when his comedy career began its meteoric

upsurge. Nevertheless he returned to academia a few years later to finish his BA and then acquire both an MA and a PhD in Education. Cosby married television producer Camille Hanks in 1964 and they had six children, of whom one, Ennis, died tragically after being shot in 1997.

While Cosby's career as a comedian began soaring in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including his debut as a stand-up at Philadelphia's The Underground Club and bookings at New York City's prestigious Gaslight Café, he struck gold with his first comedy album, "Bill Cosby Is A Very Funny Fellow, Right!", which received a 1963 Grammy nomination. He went on to win six consecutive Grammys through the decade.

Many allegations
It was from the mid-1960s, spanning 1965 to 2008, and across 10 U.S. States and one Canadian province, that

he was found guilty on three counts of felony aggravated indecent assault against Ms. Constand, and then in September of that year, he was sentenced to three to 10 years in State prison.

Cosby managed to get his conviction overturned on June 30, 2021, because of a legal loophole, the fact that in his civil case in 2005, erstwhile District Attorney for Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Bruce Castor, made a promise that Cosby would not be charged in a criminal case because he had deposited in the civil case brought by Ms. Constand. The Supreme Court last week said the prosecution in 2018 violated Cosby's right against self-incrimination by using statements he made in the civil litigation.

This decision has resulted in a setback for the gains achieved through the #MeToo movement of recent years. Since #MeToo kicked off, Cosby's was the first major criminal conviction, following allegations of sexual assault made against disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

While most TV producers have indicated that they would continue to stand by their decisions to shun the idea of ever signing Cosby on for any new programming after his release, it remains to be seen whether a man once regarded as an icon of wholesome family values will succeed in rehabilitating his public image.

AKHIL GOGOI

Always in opposition

The activist MLA says he will continue to fight the BJP's 'communal agenda'

RAHUL KARMAKAR



Akhil Gogoi has had run-ins with the Assam government since he took the Right to Information (RTI) route to expose alleged wrongdoings in 2005. But it took a turn for the worse in December 2019 when he took to the streets against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). He had been jailed for 18 months for allegedly fomenting violence during the anti-CAA protests and maintaining links with Maoists.

On July 1, he was cleared of all charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act.

In 2004-05, Mr. Gogoi led the Doyang-Tengnani Sangram Samiti that concentrated on the Doyang-Tengnani area of eastern Assam's Golaghat district where the locals, some of them alleged encroachers on forest land, were experiencing ecological transitions due to the government's development agenda. He formed the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) around that time to take up issues on a larger scale. The organisation worked on a diverse range of issues affecting farmers and daily wagers – from public distribution system thefts and non-implementation of the rural job scheme, to land rights and fighting big dam projects. About 100 cases were filed against him over the years.

Ironically, the 45-year-old Mr. Gogoi's political journey began by rejecting the politi-

cal turn the India Against Corruption campaign, led by Anna Hazare, had taken in 2011. His KMSS dissociated from the movement after Arvind Kejriwal, now the Delhi Chief Minister, and his associates decided to form the Aam Aadmi Party. But the KMSS took the political plunge by forming the Gana Mukti Sangram Asom in March 2015 for "changing the capitalist system of India". Later, the KMSS mobilised support for fighting the Sarbananda Sonowal-led government over its "Hindutva" and "anti-people" agenda, specifically the bid to implement the CAA.

Sedition charges

The anti-CAA protests saw the BJP-led government slap sedition charges on Mr. Gogoi and put him in jail in December 2019. The undercurrent of anger encouraged the KMSS and some 70 associate organisations to launch the Raijor Dal in October 2020 with Mr. Gogoi

for social transformation. He joined the United Revolutionary Movement Council of Assam, a mass organisation of the CPI-Marxist Leninist in the late 1990s but left a couple of years later to join *Natun Padatik*, an Assamese Marxist journal.

The Congress government charged him for having links with Maoists in 2010, based on a photograph he had allegedly posed in with CPI-Maoist leaders in the Saranda forest of Jharkhand in 2009. The special court of the National Investigation Agency, which acquitted him on July 1, said the photographic evidence was inconclusive. "I may believe in Marxism, but I am definitely not a Maoist the government is desperate to brand me as," Mr. Gogoi said.

He wants to focus on the development of his Assembly constituency besides spending quality time with college teacher wife Gitashree Tamuly, son and 84-year-old mother Priyada Gogoi, who had campaigned for him during the election.

Mr. Gogoi has also vowed to revive the anti-CAA fight and continue to protest the "pro-dam" and the "communal" agenda of the BJP-led government. Among his goals is ensuring a "BJP-free" Assam by 2026. But Mr. Gogoi insists that he targets political parties based on issues concerning the peasants and marginalised classes, pointing to his call to vote out the Congress from Assam in 2011.

