

Chapter 4

Campus Life

I easily and quickly settled into the campus life. Coming from India, everything in US appeared to be so easy and good and quality of life so superior that surprisingly enough I did not feel homesick at all. In fact the situation on campus helped me feel very much at home! 1974-75 were worst times in UF history with massive power cuts during weekends, low thermostat settings in winter and a great deficit in the general budget. Thus during weekends there used to be no power in the department and as the Gainesville temperature started going up all the windows of offices were opened and we had to use a hand-held fan to keep cool. It was just like India! Fortunately the situation improved in the spring quarter of 1975.

As I settled into my course work a great desire arose to learn as much as possible in all fields. It could be because of good teachers, excellent library facilities or a general ambience of scholarship. This was further helped by the fact that UF being a major university had almost all the departments on the same campus. This was very conducive to study multi-disciplinary areas.

Thus I started attending seminars in different departments. In those times there was no internet or fax so I had to go to different departments and get my name registered to receive seminar notices or fliers. On receiving them I would go and attend the seminars. Not only was I interested in solar energy or mechanical engineering but also took courses in materials science, chemical engineering, electrical engineering, and even in humanities subjects like movie appreciation, sleep and dreams etc.

I also did very well in my courses and mostly scored A or B+ grades. I remember in one course the professor gave me 150 out of 100 since I solved the extra problem which nobody else could solve. I was not a genius or brilliant but just a hard worker. So when the problem was given, I went to the library, did good research and found the solution in one of the papers in a Journal which I then applied judiciously. My solution was displayed on the notice board for others to see. Such instances happened a couple of times in other courses also.

This was also the time when electronic revolution was just being ushered in university campuses. One of my officemates bought a Hewlett Packard scientific calculator for \$850/- ! He used to guard it with his life because it was one of the first such calculators on campus besides being very costly. Hence he used to carry it all the time attached to his belt. With great difficulty he would allow me to use it for short periods of time. I was used to slide rule but found the calculator very handy and useful. In a matter of a year the prices of these calculators came down to about \$70-80. Today the same calculators will not cost more than \$5!

There used to be a great debate in our department regarding the merits of calculators vs. slide rules. All the old professors felt that the engineers would lose their feeling for design and numbers by the use of these calculators. Within few months these same professors had started using them since they were very useful. I witnessed a similar debate in early 1980s when the personal computers started appearing on the campus. The old professors complained that besides research now they would have to become secretaries also! Nevertheless in a short time they all had learned typing and found these machines very useful and handy.

UF being one of the good universities of US had a large number of famous people coming to give lectures, seminars and talks and I enjoyed attending them as often as possible. I have always found that a student has to extract as much knowledge as possible from the university education and that the university does not give it to him or her on a platter. Thus if I had a query I would go and meet the professors and discuss with him or her the issues. These meetings proved to be very useful later on when I set up the university wide multidisciplinary seminars on energy.

This thirst for knowledge made my graduate studies very enjoyable and I used to spend long hours till late at night either in my office or in the library. I remember that even during weekends I would go after dinner to my office and work till it was quite late.

A black cleaning woman who used to clean our office had been observing my behavior. So one day she came to my office and said in her black English "Are you having fuun"! I said "Yes, I enjoy my studies and hence I come to the office every night". She said, "Do you need any heellp"! I immediately understood her drift and so started going to the

library at night instead of staying in the office! In those days lots of Indian students were considered as soul brothers by the blacks and so the cleaning woman felt a certain empathy for me.

Quite a number of Indian students during weekends used to frequent bars and other night spots for female companionship, but I somehow found them quite distasteful. It was a combination of my snooty outlook where I always thought that people who frequent bars were lower forms of life or it could also be because of my shyness and lack of knowledge of dancing. I did go a few times to the local bars with my Indian friends but found the music too loud and environment too suffocating.

After the first quarter I moved into one of the cheapest dorms on the campus called Reid Coop. I shared a room with another Indian graduate student. The room was sparse containing a bed with mattress, one table and a chair. There was no air conditioning and all the residents of one floor shared a common bathroom, kitchen and dining room. The best part was the rent which was only \$ 25/month or about half that of Beaty Towers. Majority of the students who stayed in Reid Coop were foreign graduate students from India, China, Pakistan etc. There were also a good number of American students both graduate and undergraduate. Besides each one had to take turns in cleaning the kitchen, bathrooms and hallway. This was how the low dorm fees resulted.

I used to share the groceries with my roommate and another Indian graduate student who also lived on the same floor. The third student had the car and so once a week we all used to go for grocery shopping. Both my grocery mates drank a lot of beer which I did not but since the grocery bill was equally divided, I paid for the beer also. This went on for about 1-2 months and I thought that they would be sensitive enough not to ask me to pay for their beer. Finally when I protested, they said that it was also my beer and I was most welcome to drink as much as I want. I told them that I have no desire of drinking it, so they made a plan of making me aware of the good qualities of beer.

That weekend three of us went to a local beer bar and I drank about 2 liters of beer in one sitting. After the dinner and beer drinking, I could neither stand up nor talk coherently. So my roommates brought me back to my room and I slept in the drunken state. In the morning I woke up with a slight hangover and my roommate remarked that

the beer must have helped me sleep well. Since I had no problem sleeping anyway, that was the last time I drank beer. I could never develop a taste for beer or any other hard drink though I tried all of them and so I became a teetotaler by choice. In fact it used to be quite hilarious later on when I and my wife were invited to lots of parties and we were one of the few couples who remained sober after a couple of hours ! I did however develop a taste for wine but with time that also vanished.

Gainesville in those times had very few good eating places. Thus for good Chinese food we would drive to Jacksonville a good 100 miles to eat dinner! When I wrote about it to my parents they thought I and my friends were crazy to drive 100 miles just to eat Chinese food. But that was America where one did not bat an eyelid to drive 50-100 miles either to see a movie in an open air theater or eat dinner. In fact I once drove 400 miles from Gainesville to New Orleans just to see the exhibition about the famous Egyptian Prince Tutankhamen which was touring US in 1977.

Fairly soon I got quite a liking for the American food (one is not sure what exactly it is) and hence did not miss very much the Indian food till one day (3-4 months after my arrival in US) I dreamt of *parathas*! I woke up and felt really ashamed to dream of such a mundane thing as *parathas*. But then realized that the unconscious is telling me something. So I requested one of my married Indian friends to feed me a *paratha* meal. I think that quenched the desire!

When I came to US I did not know any cooking. So making simple things like scrambled eggs or an omelet became quite an exercise. However I applied my mind and learned to cook them quite well later on. Cooking a typical Indian meal however was something else. In my first month of stay in Beaty Towers my Romanian roommate insisted that I should cook an Indian meal for him. After a great difficulty I cooked some *pulao*. Somehow red chilies were put in little more abundance with the result the poor roommate had a tissue paper in one hand and a fork in the other! After that fiasco I did not cook very much in my Beaty Towers apartment and so learned most of my Indian cooking from my Reid Coop roommates.

A similar fiasco took place in the laundry in Beaty Towers. I washed my woolen sweater that my mother had lovingly knitted in the washing machine and then put it in the dryer.

The sweater shrank to one fourth its original size! I never had the heart to tell my mother what happened to it. When my parents came to visit us in Gainesville in 1978 then I showed her the sweater.

The difference in quality of life between India and US in mid - 1970s was enormous. The huge shopping malls, broad roads, highways, traveling by luxurious cars etc. was a heady fare for a student coming from a socialist country like India where getting a refrigerator required booking for it and 10 years' wait. Similarly for cars or even scooters one had to book in advance and could only get them after 10-12 years. I remember my brother who was an orthopedic surgeon getting his Bajaj scooter in 1975 through Chief Minister of U.P. Shri. H. N. Bahuguna's quota. It was a strange India. So the lure of a good US life was too much to resist for an Indian student.

Since I was in Florida it was but natural that I should go and see Disney World at the first available opportunity. This was the main Florida attraction located in Orlando which was about 120 miles from Gainesville. My American officemate offered to take me to Disney world on one long weekend in February 1975. So he and his wife drove me in their car to Orlando where we not only saw Disney World but stayed in a hotel for couple of days to see other nearby attractions also.

Visiting Disney World was like a fairy tale and it transported you to a different world. I realized then that one could easily get used to the American lifestyle. Whether it was because of the weather (very crisp beautiful February day) or the famous rock band playing in cool evening or just the general ambience of the Magic Kingdom I am not sure but it was a really wonderful experience. I could see how such things can really attract visitors from anywhere in the world. Being in Gainesville I went many times to Disney World later on because every guest to our apartment wanted to see it. But I never got the same feeling that I had the first time.

Disney World was also the attraction that brought a lot of Indian embassy officials to UF campus. In those times they used to make an excuse of going and visiting Indian students at UF to solve their problems but the main agenda was to get traveling allowance (TA/DA) for their visit to the Magic Kingdom. Being a Government of India national scholar and later on President of India association I had to arrange on short

notice quite a number of times a get together of Indian students and visiting embassy officials.

I remember one amusing incident during the time of emergency sometime in late 1975. I arranged a meeting of Indian students and Indian faculty at UF with a high ranking Indian embassy official. He had come basically to see Disney World, but his "official" visit was to sensitize the Indian students and faculty to the good effects of emergency! So he started the meeting by telling us how trains were running on time and the people came to their offices on time etc. etc.!

An Indian female student who was quite vocal, attractive and a firebrand leftist simply lit into this official. She used the choicest abuses in Hindi against Indira Gandhi and also directed them to the embassy official since he was the representative of "that evil woman". I just could not control my laughter at the discomfort the embassy official and some of the Indian UF faculty felt. The UF faculty wanted to curry some favors with the embassy official and hence they felt that I was instrumental in insulting our guest. No amount of explanation on my part that this was a free country and we were citizens of free India and so anybody had the right to say anything cut any ice with them.

The embassy official who should have been the one complaining to me about the whole episode was totally unperturbed because his main aim was to see the Disney World! On top of that he enquired about who that attractive young lady was!

Another amusing incident concerning GOI officials was when the Ambassador of India to US visited the UF campus sometime in early 1977. He was accompanied by the Commerce Minister in the embassy and a very senior Times of India correspondent.

A big party for the august visitors was arranged in one of the UF fraternity houses to which both Nandini and I were invited. The commerce minister who later on became the Foreign Secretary of India during Rajiv Gandhi's time was very fond of liquor. Since we did not drink he asked both of us to take two glasses each of drinks so that he could gulp them down. I assured him that the liquor was plenty but he was afraid that he might not get enough. Besides he was ashamed of asking the hosts. By the time the party ended

he was completely drunk. It was a sorry spectacle to see a high ranking India embassy official in such a state.

Next day the ambassador's party called us for an evening tea at a Gainesville hotel they were staying in. The ambassador who was from one of the northern Indian states was accustomed to drinking a glass of hot milk instead of tea. When the request for hot milk was made the hotel staff did not understand why anybody would want hot milk in the tea! So after a great amount of trouble and explanation the hotel staff finally boiled the half-an-half milk and brought it in a kettle. They wondered why anyone would like to drink a glass of hot milk. After the milk came the ambassador poured it in a glass, added two heaped teaspoons of sugar and drank the milk with slurping sounds! The whole hotel staff came to see this spectacle. Probably they were seeing such a thing for the first time.

Learning to drive and owning a car was another craze of most Indian students in US. In my case somehow I never got that craze but got a car out of necessity. My grocery mate who had a car was leaving for India and so I and my roommate realized that we would be without a transport. In those days the bus service in Gainesville was nearly non-existent and hence I decided to learn driving. I also decided to buy the car from the grocery mate for \$ 200/-. It was an old Ford Falcon which was a gas guzzler but in good running condition.

My grocery mate was amazed when I learned to drive within about 15 minutes of his training. So after one month of drive runs with special emphasis on parallel parking I decided to give the driving test. Two other Indian students also went with me in the Ford to the Florida transport office to give the test.

My number for taking the test came last. The driving inspector sat next to me and I started the car. She immediately told me to stop it and flunked me. I had put the car in gear without releasing the hand brake! I was livid and complained loudly to the Indian student of why he had put the brake. He shot back in anger stating that he also flunked the test because he did not put the brake at the end of his test! After flunking him the

inspector told him to put the hand brake so the car would be ready for my test drive. In any case both of us again took the test after 15 days and passed with ease.

In those times it was very easy to get a cheap second hand car and thus \$ 200 Ford served me for almost two years after which I sold it again for \$ 200 and bought a smaller and more fuel-efficient Toyota Corolla (again second hand) for \$ 600.

In fact buying a second hand car was one of the first purchases of quite a number of Indian students (my first purchase was an SLR camera). Since the gas was cheap and priced at 70-80 cents/gallon this was really a great way to see America. One of my Indian friends at UF was from Chennai (then Madras). He was very dark and as per the fashion of those times sported long hair. He had bought a second hand Volkswagen Beetle a small car and he and his friends went touring the south. In one of the towns of Alabama they were caught speeding. So after the cop gave him the ticket he remarked, "And another thing I don't like is a nigger with long hair. Go get a haircut"!

University of Florida in the 1970s was a very liberal campus. It was voted by one of the US magazines as the second most liberal campus after Berkeley. It was also voted as the party school by Playboy magazine in middle of 1970s. Besides, it was the post-Vietnam era when the sexual revolution was at its height in US.

In my first quarter when I was staying in Beaty Towers I saw this liberal attitude first hand. My Romanian roommate had invited me to a party in one of his friend's apartment. He had also invited some of his professors, their wives and his departmental secretaries. This was not a dance or song party but just a get together of his friends whom I was meeting for the first time. He went early in the afternoon to make the necessary arrangements and I went late in the evening. Just before I left for the party my American roommate offered me a condom! I was aghast but he insisted that such items are necessary and useful in parties.

Another incident of similar nature took place when I was staying in Reid Coop. One day I came back to my dorm around 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. to cook my dinner. When I went into the kitchen I saw around 10-20 of my floor residents standing in the balcony and cheering a striptease show taking place in the women's dorm just across the Reid Coop. This had

been going on for quite some time and the lady enjoyed entertaining the boys in our Coop ! I had never seen it earlier because I used to come early around 5 or 5:30 p.m. and leave for my office around 7 p.m. In those times streaking (or students running naked) was also a common sight during football games, open air concerts or just about anywhere in public on the campus.

Similarly there was an American student who lived on my floor in Reid Coop and was very well endowed. So every day in the morning he used to walk naked to the common shower and then walk back naked after his bath to his room which was at the end of the hall. Quite a number of times female students from other dorms came to our dorm to visit their boyfriends and they enjoyed this spectacle. Though there were visitation hours in the dorms for visitors of opposite sex, they were hardly followed. Similarly there were separate dorms for men and women, but there was a lot of mating which went on in these dorms in those times. The American morals were really breaking down !

Halloween celebration on the campus was an extremely raunchy affair with wholesale debauchery, and liberal use of alcohol and drugs like marijuana. The main event took place in the center of University in Plaza of Americas-a big open space between main library and the Century Towers. It was really a carnival like atmosphere with loud music, frenzied dancing and obscene floats taken around. All these hedonistic activities were stopped later on by the university authorities in late 1970s.

Similarly it was a strange sight for students and visitors to see belly dancing taking place in the corridors of student union during lunch break. Initially the sight of the semi-naked women gyrating to Arabic music was really shocking, but with time I got blasé about seeing the flesh.

There used to be regular open air concerts by Dave Brubeck and his famous jazz band on the lawns of the University near Mechanical Engineering department. The whole atmosphere used to be pervaded by a strong smell of marijuana. UF campus being very liberal in those times allowed lots of such activities. As US became more conservative in the 1980s all these activities eventually stopped.

Nevertheless this was also the time of increasing usage of heavy drugs and Florida became the conduit of these drugs from Latin America to mainland US. Thus there were large scale thefts of electronic precision balances from the labs on the campus since the drug dealers used them to weigh the drugs.

Stealing was a major problem on campus. Couple of times my office was broken into (both on and off campus one) and I lost quite a few things like calculators, watches and other office supplies. Even on the campus there used to be a large number of thefts of bicycles. So if you locked the front wheel the back wheel was gone or if you locked both the wheels the frame was stolen. It was very difficult to understand why such thefts took place in a rich society like America.

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