THANK YOU, CORNELL, THANK YOU AMERICA!

By N.U.PRABHU, PROFESSOR EMERITUS

1. I came to America in 1964 with my family. I taught at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan during 1964-1965 and in 1965 I came to Cornell. These 50 years have been the best years of my life. Thank you Cornell, thank you America!

   My career was shaped by David Kendall of Cambridge, England, Joe Gani of Australia and Frank Spitzer of Cornell. Frank invited me to present a seminar in the Math Department. He had already recommended me to the IE Department. Soon after this, I received an offer from the IE Department.

   Bob Bechhofer and Lionel Weiss were the founding fathers of the IE Department. Both were products of the Columbia University Statistics Department, along with Jack Kiefer. Jack Wolfowitz was senior to them (probably on the Faculty of Columbia then).

   I do not wish to talk more about the academic matters, because academia may be up in the clouds, but real life is here on the ground and I was on a journey to discover America.

2. During the 1960’s many political, social and cultural events were taking place in the United States. President Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated. There were student disturbances on the Berkeley campus. I heard the slogan: Hell no, we won’t go! The reference was to students being drafted to fight in Vietnam. There was considerable opposition among students (and some faculty) to the US involvement in Vietnam. I remember Jack Kiefer withholding a part of his income tax payment to register his protest. These protests came to an end with the decision from Washington ending the draft and giving students the option of joining the Peace Corps.

3. When all this ended the students threatened to burn down the buildings around the campus. Faculty members were drafted to keep a watch over the buildings. My assignment was Upson Hall. I remember sitting in a corner room overlooking a parking lot. I parked my car there at some risk and sat in the room until 11 PM and then went home.

4. A little later there emerged the Students for a Democratic Society, whose objective was to eliminate the distinctions between generations: parents and children, faculty and students. Thus, instead of greeting their parents with “Hi Dad, Hi Mom!” children said “Hi Tom, Hi Edie!” This did not last too long. However, faculty went along with this idea. They took off their neckties and jackets. Bob Bechhofer grew a beard and suggestion I should do the same. I respectfully declined.

5. About this time an ugly incident took place at Cornell. The Ku Klux Klan group left a burning cross at the Africana Center. In protest, three African-American students carrying guns occupied Willard Straight Hall for 36 hours. Considerable negotiations took place to get them out of
there. A lot of controversy ensued over the negotiations with the Faculty reversing the agreement reached and President Perkins having to resign.

6. The anti-Vietnam protest combined with the Civil Rights issue led to a genre of music beginning with Robert Zimmerman’s (Bob Dylan) songs: ‘Blowing in the Wind’, ‘The Times they are a-changing’. The polished versions of these songs were sung by Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez and Judy Collins. Pete Seeger, a close friend of Woody Guthrie also composed songs of this type.

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