



"The round-the-clock darkness that descended on Antarctica presented an exhilarating display of cosmic lights and an insight into the wonders of the sky over polar regions. The challenges posed by Nature also brought out the best in each of us almost holding our inner self in front of us like a mirror"

Dakshin Gangotri station had been built two years earlier during 1983-84 austral summer, on the surface of the ice shelf. However, due to later snow accumulation as a result of blizzards, and some degree of subsidence, the station was already submerged upto eves level. Thus, only the conical roof of the station was visible outside. Effectively our living rooms were located about 35 feet below the surface fully entombed in ice. There were a couple of vertical ladders fixed from the roof to go inside or come out of the station. These exit or entry points were covered by easily removable hatches to check snow ingress inside the station building. The whole station complex had mainly three wings – the northern block which had living, entertainment, communication and office accommodation; the southern block accommodating stores and generator machines; and a link block that connected these two main blocks. The link block was usually kept as a clear passage but sometimes few food packages were kept there for easy access. On the western side of north block, beyond the living rooms was the toilet complex. These were chemical toilets, five in a row connected to septic tank buried deep in the ice shelf. There were bathrooms also in the same complex with running hot and cold water facility but water was a hard earned commodity. We had to melt ice into water and then use it for washing and drinking purposes. For this snow/ice from a selected area on shelf that was protected from trespassing was shoveled in physically by two galley duty persons daily. The shoveled ice fell through a chute inside the station into a stainless steel tank fitted with electric heaters. The melt water was pumped to a storage tank from where it was distributed to kitchen and bathroom complexes. Since the s.s.tank inside was of small capacity we had to spend quite some time in the freezing temperature outside waiting for one lot of ice to melt and the water pumped up before the next bulk of ice was shoveled in. Howsoever tiring it was, the exercise was a necessity mixed with considerable degree of fun and frolic.

Further, below the level of living room was the common lounge and kitchen. We had managed to place a Table Tennis table in the lounge that was enriched by rows of racks on the walls which were well stocked with choicest books and audio/video cassettes. It is from the eastern edge of this room that link block connected the generator and store room complex on the south.

I must have slept for a few hours when strange sounds of gunshot woke me up with a start. I found that RKS was also awake and lying still on his berth trying to contemplate what was the source of this sound. Although we both had ideas in our heads, we did not speak out. Instead, we left our beds and went out of the room to investigate. The sound of intermittent shooting boomed through the station building though apparently everything was normal. Knowing very well that there was no human being anywhere nearby (nearest

were the Russians in Novolazarevskaya station nearly 100 km away) and that we were not in a battle field or a disturbed area by any standard, our concern to locate the source or cause of this sound increased manifold. One can imagine our state of mind as it was our very first night in the station totally on our own. We briefly discussed about the possibility of hallucination effects but it was difficult to believe that both RKS and myself were hallucinated at the same time in a similar manner. After all these years I do not remember exactly whether we woke up VKD or he himself came out in the lounge but drawing from his experience he could explain the phenomenon. We were, in fact, listening to a sound which had its origin in the breaking of huge chunks of ice somewhere far away. It appeared like gunshot since the sound traveled through the thick column of shelf ice and was registered by our ears as we lay on our beds inside the wooden station building.



Dakshin Gangotri station, an aerial view

All through the summer time Sun was well above the horizon and it had started setting only at the end of January. The duration of night was gradually increasing with the approach of austral winter. By the time we were left alone after the sailing of the ship, nights had lengthened considerably. The darkness was increasing perceptibly every day. It was important that we finished with the left over work that had to be done outside the station viz. cleaning of the antenna park; snow clearance from around the station building; positioning and stacking of food, fuel, machinery and essential items etc. Bhaskara Rao (TVPBR), our friend from India Meteorological Department (IMD) set up an automatic weather station popularly called Data Collection Platform (DCP) over the rooftop of the garage hangar that was about 50 metres south of the main station building. With the installation of DCP the weather parameters recorded at DG station were transmitted on real time basis to Meteorological Data Utilisation Centre in New Delhi through Indian National Satellite (INSAT - 1B). The EME team of Indian Army put the vehicles inside the garage and the hangar was closed.

In early May 1986 we were allset to face the dark winter ahead. While inside the station it was a routine and mundane life, outside the picture changed rapidly. With the lengthening of shadows and very little duration of sunshine the whole scenario had changed. On a windless day or night a deathly silence pervaded the whole universe around

us. When the weather was clear stars appeared to be on our doorstep. Temperature was dipping fast and we had started using face mask to protect our face tissues from cold injury.

We were having occasional spells of blizzard when outside work was not possible. But galley duty people had to go out and shovel in the fresh snow for our water needs. Only a person who has faced the situation can actually appreciate the extraordinary efforts made by these people to keep the life going inside the station.

Sometime in the last week of May 1986 the Sun set behind the horizon and disappeared for two long months.

We started realizing that wintering in Antarctica is a unique experience as, almost every day, a new facet of it was revealing itself. There used to be a general feeling or perhaps even today many feel so, that during austral winter no outside work can be done and therefore, nothing can be achieved from the angle of scientific studies by wintering over there in Antarctica. This is not true. Besides geomagnetic and meteorological studies an austral winter presents an excellent opportunity to carry out research in human physiological response to cryogenic conditions; and also the changes that are induced in the psychological regime of the people living in isolation.

Since we humans are essentially 'social animals' it is the biggest challenge for organizers of the Antarctic expeditions and team leaders/station commanders to ensure a healthy atmosphere in the station at all times. VKD having already wintered once in Antarctica, possessed the skill necessary to guarantee a smooth stay of the team in Dakshin Gangotri.

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We faced innumerable blizzards with wind speeds often touching more than 110 nautical miles per hour i.e. nearly 200 kmph. One such spell lasted for seven days at a stretch. After every episode of blizzard the station complex in the open had to be cleared of accumulated extra snow. A piston bully vehicle fitted with blade was used for this purpose. The exercise was very tricky as slightest error of judgment on the part of the driver of the vehicle or the person guiding him on ground could rip open the station building wall.

VKD used to keep us on our toes strongly believing that an idle brain is devil's workshop. Even if he relented at times, Nature did not. We were allotted galley duties very judiciously. Two persons on a given day had to sweep and mop the entire station; help the cook in the kitchen; keep record of fuel consumption, hourly ampere meter reading etc of the station generators; melt ice/snow for making water; arrange food during lunch and dinner times besides keeping tea/coffee and snacks for consumption on the dining table besides many other sundry jobs. But the most dreaded one was cleaning the bath and toilet complex.

Alongside the work we were doing, entertainment occupied an important place in our daily routine. It was here that I first fathomed the significance of taking rest at the end of a busy day; and understood why there is an urge to get immersed in pure entertainment balancing the stress of living a lonely and monotonous life so far away from our known world and habitual surroundings.

Besides the books, movies and indoor games like carom, T.T. and cards – outdoor activities gave us immense pleasure. When weather was good, irrespective of the ambient temperature we went for long walks over the ice shelf, cleaned the area around station complex and indulged in extending helping hand to scientists collecting data or the logistic team repairing vehicles. Playing football in soft snow at temperatures as low as minus 41 degrees C wearing full gear including face mask, was both fun and challenge at the same time.

We celebrated birthdays of team members as well as their family members with much fanfare. Our great cook Das (PBD) was a magician in his kitchen. He used to make very tasty cakes though we had no oven in the station. Handsome and vivacious this Nepali boy was a very good singer, a good sportsman, voracious reader and an innovative chef. Not well educated but with his abilities and a golden heart PBD was cynosure of all eyes. Each and every member had something to offer to the rest of the team beyond his accredited task and commitment. My close friend Bhaskara Rao (TVPBR) was extraordinary by many counts. He had come for just four months as a summer team member but agreed to stay back for a whole year when his colleague had to return home after having hurt himself accidentally. TVPBR displayed not only perfect scientific acumen but also much beyond that. His stunning ability to stitch clothes could strongly compete with that of any established tailor. VKD's constant encouragement and pestering resulted in bringing out the hidden talents of almost all of us. I found that everyone had a story to tell and everyone had a unique style of narration. I was surprised to find myself writing verses in both Hindi and English with fair ease. Antarctic wintering gives one the courage and freedom to express himself without slightest hint of hesitation, fear or prejudice.

I remember the preparations we undertook to celebrate MID WINTER DAY on 21 June 1986. Mid Winter Day is a very important celebration in round the year Antarctic stations when those who are wintering for the first time are crowned as "PolarMen". The day is celebrated by all the wintering stations in Antarctica and messages, greetings are exchanged between stations of different countries. World leaders and people involved in polar science or polar adventure join those actually fighting it out in the cold desert, through ether. In DG station 13 of us were first time wintering members. Elaborate programmes were chalked out for the day. Short plays were written, actors were chosen and trained to act by someone or the other who probably had never before entered a theatre arena himself.

On 21 June 1986 the small lounge of the station had the look and grace of a theatre hall. We had audience of not only Indian team members but also guests from the Russian station Novolazarevskaya.. TVPBR, Chandrachoodan (Chandra), RKS, R.K.Unni (RKU), Shankar Malvade (SHAM), PBD and Surjit Singh (SS) were the chief architects of the evening's programme. It was flabbergasting to measure the enormity of the efforts put in by this brigade. Almost out of nothingness they had created a full fledged stage complete with electromechanically operated curtain. The performance was spellbinding by all these first timers who presented several plays, monoacts, skits etc. in full and appropriately suitable costumes. Costumes !! Don't get stupefied. TVPBR, with assistance from his fellow team members had stitched the costumes for the entire show using the bundles of curtain and sofa cover clothes lying in the station. The show was well compered by RKU but it was not only about plays and skits; there was qawwali, solo songs, poetry recitation, full scale orchestra and finally hearty dance. The Russian guests were dumbstruck at the ability of Indians to set such a high standard of cultural extravaganza.

India's flag was flying high and buoyed by the enthusiasm shown by his team members, VKD suggested that a station magazine be brought out to set a tradition. He entrusted me the overall responsibility of making it feasible.

To be concluded.....

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