

# **BEC'69 MAGAZINE**

**March 2017**



- 1. NEW YEARS MALANCHA TRIP – DR. DIPANKAR GHOSH**
- 2. MANAN – ARIJIT SENGUPTA**
- 3. THE “ROCK!” – PRIYANKA, DAUGHTER-IN-LAW OF PRABIR SENGUPTA**

## **Celebration of New Year Eve By BEC69 Members**

The friends and families of BEC69 have been celebrating New Years eve regularly for last 9 / 10 years. Most of the time the celebrations were on the deck of Steamers or in the rented venues. This time the function was held in Malacha Tourist Lodge in Barrackpore.

The members spent about 24 hours in various deluxe rooms of this lodge situated on the bank of Ganga. The surrounding areas of Dhobi Ghat and Lat-Bagan are very beautifully maintained with Park, Pond, Picnic spot, memoir of Sipahi Mutiny and famous Gandhi Ghat.

About 40 persons, including a guest couple assembled before lunch-time near the reception desk of the lodge. From lunch to evening, Adda among the friends and ladies group went on full swing. After that the lady-members and few friends participated in 'Housie Game' lead by Supratik and Kishore. The game created lot of interests among the players and Arijit won the Full-House championship.

In the evening the main celebration was organized in the main portico and adjoining area with inaugural song by Arijit and Papri. Next Robinda enchanted all the members with his excellent "Swasti-Bachan" followed by song of Rajanikanta. Gradually Gauri, Subha, Indira, Lily and Dipankar Mukherjee ( guest ) came forward with their songs and recitations. As usual, Ashok made all spell-bound with the songs of golden era and his melodious voice.

Te most interesting part of the program was the "true" ghost-stories told by Bandana Mukherjee from her personal experience. Bandana, ex Station-Director of Doora Darsan, Kolkata. She is still very busy with social services and various other activities.

In the middle of her thrilling stories, both the hands of the clock touched 12 mark and the sirens of the steamers started blowing. Fireworks were visible on the sky above Church in Srirampur on the opposite bank of Ganga. The members greeted each other for 'Happy New Year – 2017'.

Please click on the following link to view the Pictures of our Malancha Trip uploaded in the Picture Gallery of our bec69.org website:

<http://www.bec69.org/bec69/pgallery.php>

- Dr. Dipankar Ghosh

## মনন

আমি সকলনে হঠাৎ

স্বপ্নাময়াকে চম্পিনাটো বছর জিহ্বলে —  
অবশ্যই সত্য হৃদয়টি আমলো জেথের মাঝলে ॥

কারণ আছে অবশ্য —

সমিধানটোও চিহ্নিত স্বপ্নের এক শীতের মোড়,  
বোম্বুর গায়ে জাথের বোম্বাফিফা এক নিম্নো —  
আমার নতুন চলার প্রথমদিন ।

অবশ্যই কাঁচ বছরে —

আমার হাথে চলেছে যোগসিহ্নোজের স্বপ্ন ।

হুবন আমন অবশ্যই, স্বপ্নন এমে ডব্বিছে জন ।

আমার মনে চলেছে দুঃখসুখের খেলার ।

বেশ কিছু বছরের মধ্যে —

অধিবর্তনের মোতে আমাকে সত্যসুতলে —

সত্য অধিবর্তন, সত্য প্রতিকূলতার মোতে

আমতে আমতে এখনও আছি মুক্তি ।

হঠাৎ আর দেখি —

অমৃত সুপ্ত-একটোই — ; আর বন্ধুদের মধ্যে ;

নেতৃত্বদের মধ্যে ; আমার আমননের মধ্যে ;

আমি এক বার, অমৃত বারী ।

যদিও এখন বিকাল ।

অধিবর্তন অমৃত  
৫ই অক্টোবর, ২০১৭

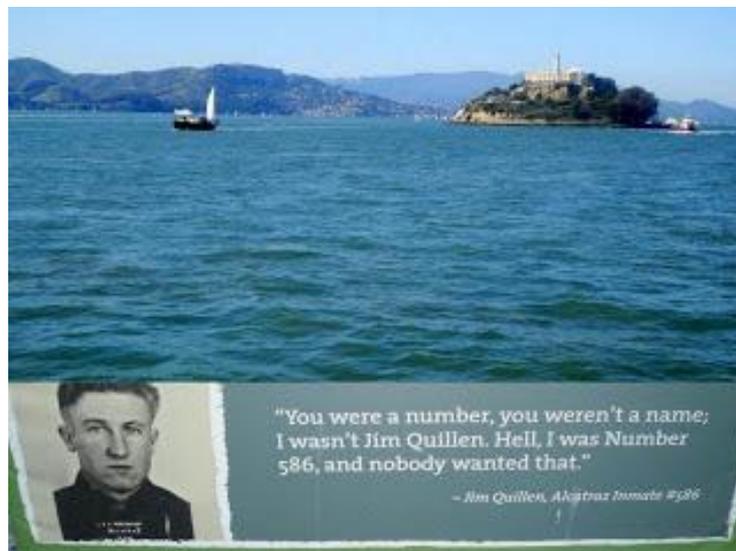
**The following article is written by my younger daughter in law,  
Priyanka. It was written by her when they were staying in Pleasanton  
near San Francisco, US.**

**Thanks and Best Wishes,**

**Prabir Sengupta**

## The “Rock!”

Imagine waking up every morning to the chirping sounds of birds in an island surrounded by blue water, green trees, pretty colorful flowers, near-by hills and a beautiful city not too far! Wouldn't it be just the perfect abode? Now imagine the same circumstances with a twist. You wake up in the same place and surroundings, the only difference being you are behind bars or in a cage!!! That is how I would describe Alcatraz in one sentence, the then Federal Prison that was in operation from 1933 until 1963. Situated in the San Francisco Bay, 1.5 miles offshore from San Francisco city, California, this island looks perfect to the eyes that gaze for serenity and tranquility! But when an island like this transforms into a prison and you happen to be there, you perhaps understand the value of being free, the freedom that we take for granted almost all our lives. Even the most beautiful place can turn into a nightmare in the wake of losing our identities, in the wake (or fall) of being reduced to a number! These were the exact thoughts that shrouded my mind when I set foot onto this island for the first time.



Reduced to a Number!

Well, the story does not begin and end there. The history takes you back to a long almost forgotten chapter when this beautiful little land on the lap of the bay was inhabited by the Native Americans. The tribe(s) for generations lived on this island in harmony with nature – the trees, the shrubs, the pelicans, the sea gulls, the sea lions ... and I believe this land was called “Atascadero” – which refers to a berry that dominated the island during that period. After decades, this island, like any other human stories of conquests, invasions, discoveries and re-discoveries of new land, also walked similar path. The Europeans ventured the globe and the Spanish were the first to set foot on this land in the bay. Juan Manuel de Ayala, who charted the San Francisco Bay, was the first to discover the island. He named the island "La Isla de los Alcatrazes", that roughly translates to "Island of the Pelicans" and was later Anglicized to “Alcatraz”, as we call today!

This chapter in history overlapped with the California Gold Rush, and with the booming of San Francisco city, it was seen as a much needed movement to protect the SF Bay. Thus was born the Presidential Order in the early 1850s to build a Citadel, or fortress,

at the top of the island. History will also remember this island as the site of the first operational lighthouse on the west coast of the United States.

Subsequently, the island started housing the military prisoners and with the diminishing defensive needs, the island was transformed into federal prison that holds prominence as the famous “Rock” as we see it today! The “Rock” served as the United States Penitentiary from 1933 until 1963. In the years to follow, the media made this prison immensely popular as one of the harshest reformatory in the country. Several books, movies, documentaries brought it to the limelight and now it definitely is a tourist magnet for people visiting the renowned American destination called San Francisco!



The Rock!

I had first seen this island from the waterfront of the Pier 39 and to me the Rock looked like a sailing ship on the bay with its lighthouse as the mast, and since then I was fascinated to catch up with this “ship”!

So after a few weeks of my first distant encounter with Alcatraz, I and my husband decided to be up, close and personal with it on a bright Saturday morning, 17th March, 2012. We boarded our “cruise” from Pier 33 and were mesmerized at the beauty of the bay!



Cruise

The rippling tides, the breeze, the sea gulls, and even a few dolphins on the way made this short journey a fascinating one!!! But suddenly as we approached the Rock, a strange and eerie feeling inched through my bones! This was not just an island, this place was filled with stories, stories of prison inmates, their lives, their escape attempts, the prison officers, their families, their encounters with the inmates and the old dilapidated buildings- and these seemed to echo their past, perhaps haunted, but I wanted to know all about it. You have guided tours available, but we decided to plan our day on our own, at our own pace.

We started our journey right from the prison gate. That is where we wanted to begin! One sentence at the entrance could tell you so much!

*“Break the rules and you go to prison, break the prison rules and you go to Alcatraz”!*



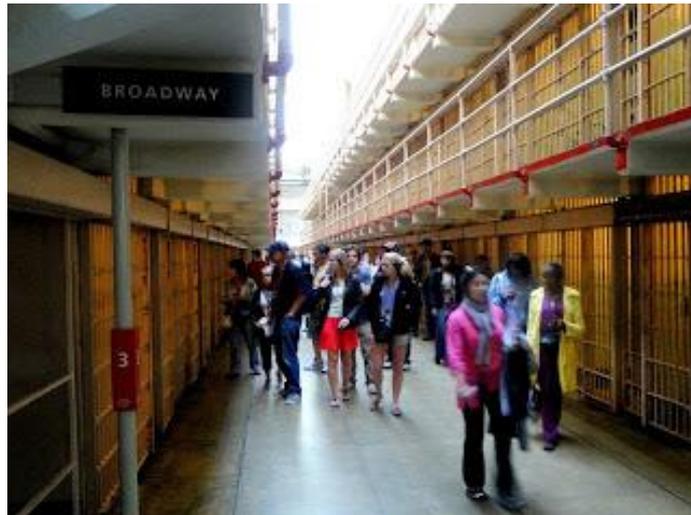
The Prison Entrance

Its reputation as a cold and intolerant reformatory seemed to be reinforced in these words! This “prison system’s prison” was specifically constructed to house the most ghastly prisoners, the agitators that other federal prisons could not successfully detain. Its isolated location made it ideal for the banishment of these men!

“Welcome to the Rock!!!”

---Thus began the self-guided audio tour of the cell house that proved to be both informative and intriguing. I could listen to the stories for hours and could write a book on it! It was horrifying and astounding!

The three-story cell house consisted four blocks, A, B, C, and D-Block, the warden's office, visitation room, the library, the control room and the barber shop. The central walkway in the cell block between B and C was named “Broadway”, that runs towards “Time Square” under the clock at the gateway to the cafeteria.



Broadway



Visitation & Control Room

These names sounded so paradoxical. People from across the globe get excited to be in the Broadway, the Times Square of the American World but here, the same words carried such different meanings to the lives of those inmates! I learnt that the new prisoners were marched down Broadway on their arrival while the inmates taunted and cried out of their cells. If you have seen the movie “Escape from Alcatraz” or any such series as “Prison Break”, you will know exactly what it means.

I was transformed into a whole new world, a world where darkness resides. While passing each cell block, I felt as if I was traversing time, as if I was being mocked and ridiculed by those inmates. Several sounds and chaotic noises seemed to call out to me. I know there are no ghosts, but these stories, and this place gives the most definite creepy and haunted feeling! You may be laughing reading this in the comforts of your home, but believe me, once you are there, it will be all so different! I spoke to a few workers there, and they echoed my sentiments.

Each cell typically measured 9 feet by 5 feet by 7 feet high. The cells were primitive with a few furnishings like a bed with a pillow and blanket, a desk and a washbasin and toilet on the back wall. Most cells have been conserved as it was. Even without listening

to the tape, you could make out how some of the inmates chose to spend their captivity in a more meaningful way! Books, musical instruments, paintings, game boards in the cells seemed to tell their individual stories. The audio tour also guided us through the cells of the infamously famous convicts.



Prison Cells

One amongst them was the Birdman's cell. Robert Stroud was called the "Birdman of Alcatraz". However, contrary to the common belief, he did not have birds in his cell! While he was serving his term in Leavenworth, Kansas, on manslaughter, and inmate attack charges, he developed interest in birds and wrote two books on canaries. His studies were allowed because it was seen as a constructive activity, but on finding contraband items hidden in bird cages and murdering a guard in the jail, he was deployed to Alcatraz, where he spent the next 17 years of his life! Over its 29 years of operation, the federal prison housed more than 1,500 convicts.

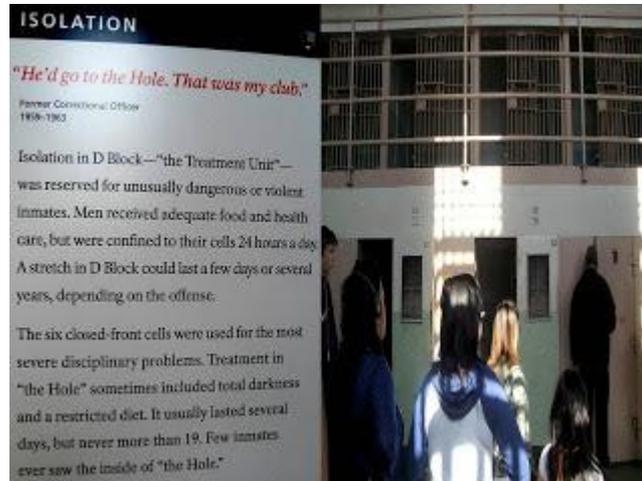
We got ourselves locked in one of the empty cells just to get a feel, and I should say that we were so lucky not to have the General around to lock us in! I felt for the first time, what is it meant to be FREE!



Locked up!

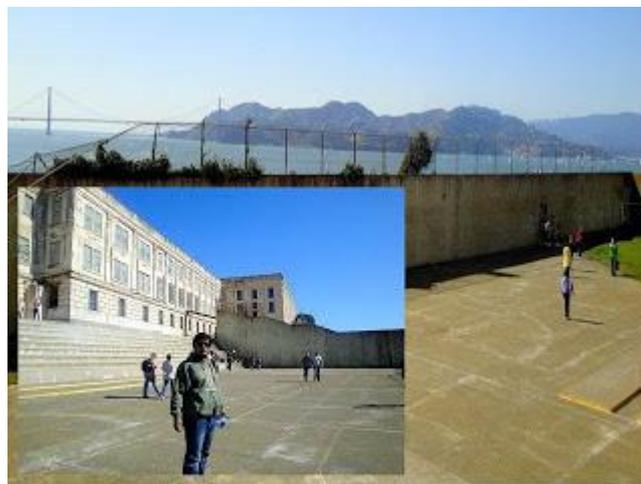
Back to facts, racial abuses being prevalent in those days, the blacks were segregated from the rest, in specified cells. D-Block was the residing place for the worst behaved inmates and six cells at the end of it were designated as "The Hole", where inmates

who would often trigger rule breaks would be sent for periods of punishment. The “Treatment Unit” in this “Solitary Confinement” block resulted in my rush of adrenaline! We were given an in-hand experience of what it feels like to be in an absolute closed dark room, without a trace of light, that lasted not more than a minute, and I was scared to death.



The Hole

At the first opportunity out from there, I went to the Recreational Yard, which was a large open ground. The tales told me that this was a rare opportunity given to inmates when they could roam around freely, play baseball, or run laps. And like some, when I climbed those huge stairs on the yard to the top, I could immediately sense looking out at the bay, what they missed, what they had lost. Just miles away (is the city of SF), was their Freedom!



Recreational Yard

They could see it, yet not feel it. Perhaps, this strong desire of trying to fill in this vacuum, led to the great escape attempts from this confinement! Historical accounts say that there have been around 14 attempts of escapes from Alcatraz by around 30 prisoners. However, none has been documented to be successful. Most were caught, several were shot, and the rest were swallowed by the chilling swells of the San Francisco Bay.

“No one has ever escaped from, Alcatraz ... and no one ever will” – read the famous line from the movie “Escape from Alcatraz” (1979).

This perhaps is true, “perhaps” because of one very intelligently devised plan that still plants doubts in the minds of one and all! I was no exception. You cannot but appreciate the minds that charted such strategy, even if, yes, the minds were those of criminals! In the morning of June 11, 1962, Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin were seen missing from their cells and were never seen again. (This escape has been made famous in the same movie). An investigation exposed a tricky escape plot that involved drills to enlarge vent holes, false wall segments! The escapists even shaped realistic dummy heads placed in their beds so that they would not be missed during night time counts by the cell guards, when they were busy working through their plans, right in the back of their cells. The three men exited through vent holes that they enlarged, located in the rear wall of their cell. Behind the rear wall of the cells was a utility corridor that had locked steel doors at either end. The three men climbed the utility pipes to the top of the cellblock, and gained access to the roof through an air vent. They then climbed down a drainpipe on the northern end of the cell house and made their way to the water. They used prison-issued raincoats to cut out crude life vests and a raft to assist in their swim. This must have taken days and days of smart work! To this day, no signs of the men have been found. Several weeks later, a man's body dressed in blue clothing similar to the prison uniform was found a short distance up the coast from San Francisco, but the body was too badly damaged to be recognized. The three men are officially listed as missing and presumed drowned! But there is no evidence to prove anything! The cells of these men, the dummies, the vent hole are all there to see and you keep wondering and weaving the details in your head! Walking down the corridor and looking through those cells gave me a chill run down my spine!



The Great Escapade

With several of these stories spinning in my mind, we went to see the control room, the visitation chamber, and the cafeteria and kitchen. One aspect of this prison that truly deserves appreciation is the cafeteria rules. Unlike most prisons, this was one in the country that served same food to both the inmates and the officers, and the standards were very high! The then first warden, understood the criticality of food in housing dangerous men in America. Many prison riots had started because of the poor standards in food and he did not want to leave a hole there. The Alcatraz cafeteria was

one of the finest in the prison system. However, that did not fully ensure that this dining was without incidents! Strange it might sound, the park rangers have reported muffled noises and clanging of silverware coming from the empty cafeteria!



Dining Hall and Kitchen

Relief!!! It was such a pleasure coming out in the open again from the cell house that gripped me in some peculiar fear! The Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Bay Bridge from this island was a sight to behold!



Bay from the island!

Walking past the cell house, we came upon the Warden House, of which only the pillars remain! The house was destroyed in a 1970 fire. Since then, many a parties have been held there and on many occasions, people have been reported saying that they saw ghostly men wandering! The lights were said to flicker on and off on its own! Well, they could be wild imaginations and a revelation of the fear of minds! But being there, you can relate to these figments!



Warden's House

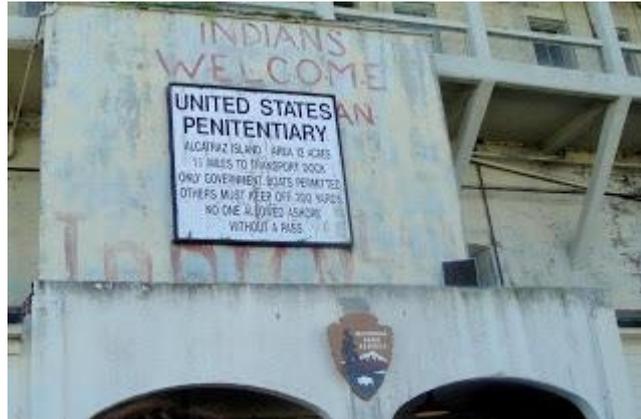
The Warden House and the Building 64, one of the first sights of the island when you step off and on the boat, and that housed the family members of the prison officers, kept me thinking how the wives, the children spent their days in that island knowing that they were surrounded my most feared men in America!



Building 64

I kept thinking how they lead their perfect normal life in such an environment! Yes, there was a human connection, but was that strong enough? I do not really have an answer for sure! But fate took us down to the museum of the prison, where we happened to meet an inmate, who spent several years in the Alcatraz prison and today, he was a hero! He wrote his accounts of his life in Alcatraz in his autobiography and people were swarming to get his autograph! Times change, people change and yes, maybe many a times, reformatory really does change a human for better! ... and today I recall reading a review of a tourist (assuming American) who had gone to this island and caught up with an Australian tourist who simply said ... "That's how my country began..."

On our way back, as I was engrossed in thoughts, a guide called us to the front of the Building 64 and huge texts on the wall above that read "Welcome Indians" caught my attention! Well, you cannot miss it when you first land there, but the words didn't ring a bell in my mind then!



"Welcome Indians"

At first, I thought those were from primitive times, when the Natives wandered in this land, but on second thoughts I felt I was missing something! The building was not there then, and probably they didn't write in today's script, so was that just some stray writings or did that have a meaning?! Just then, the small piece of puzzle fitted right in, and our guide told us the fate of the island after the prison was gone!

American Indians of many tribes returned to the island in 1969 and claimed it as Indian Land. Most were college students and many were the descendants of tribes that lived on the island centuries back! They lived on the island for around 18 months after which, the National Park System took over and today, Alcatraz is part of the Golden Gate Recreational Area. However, the "Alcatraz Occupation" is now acknowledged as a milestone in American Indian history as a new beginning, a reawakening of American Indian culture, and traditions.

After a long day in the island, as we boarded our vessel back to San Francisco, I was filled with wonder. The accounts, the stories, the buildings, the history, the changing times were invincible. It was all so calm and placid again in the Bay as the sun set, painting the sky red and orange and leaving me in the hues of an unforgettable experience!

