

SOS at Sea

Gautam Chatterjee

W.P.C. Wing, Deptt. of Telecom, New Delhi

History has on record that in 1899 the first SOS (Save our Soul) was transmitted by a ship called *elbe* while sinking on the goodwin sands in the straits of Dover. The message was picked up ashore and rescue life-boat could reach in time and save those crewmen. This was the first time in history SOS was beamed and crewmen were saved. Since then the role of radio become very important and it had furthered the longevity of those crewmen who now could send their distress message thousands of miles away.

But soon it became a problem because the same frequency was used for communications as well as for distress call and this congestion in the same radio-wave created confusion among sea navigators. This issue was raised in the first International Radio Conference of 1906. Before long, in 1914 "Safety of Life At Sea" (SOLAS) was formed which became a part of International Maritime Organisation (IMO). IMO's fundamental aim is to reduce accidents and provide measures for search and rescue operations which had saved thousands of lives of those who braved the sea.

Even after beaming SOS when crewmen had to abandon their ships they faced on acute hazard of not drowning but death due to cold which is medically known as Hypothermia. Historically one can trace back in 1912 a sinking ship TITANIC beamed SOS and its crewmen and other persons on board numbering 1,489 had to abandon the ship as fire had engulfed the vessel. Rescue ship reached the spot 110 minutes after the call only to dis-

cover that all crew members had died by then due to exposure to Zero Degree 'C' water temperature as they had no proper clothing or preparedness to meet this eventuality. During World War II most of the seamen died of Hypothermia rather than drowning. To take example of Royal Navy of United Kingdom along 45000 seamen had been lost in second World War on this count.

SOLAS Convention had voiced their concern and designed safety measures for those seamen in distress. Convention says "Most lifeboats, for example, must be totally or partially enclosed. The latter must have rigid covers extending over 20 per cent of the lifeboat's length and be equipped with a foldable canopy to cover the rest". For passenger ship regulations were made that the ship should have totally enclosed boats and some partially enclosed boats to facilitate and provide conducive temperature for the survival of untrained passengers during distress at sea.

International Maritime Organisation had published a Pocket Guide to Cold Water Survival to facilitate sea-men at the time of distress. It says 'It is important to realise that you are not helpless to effect your own survival in cold water. Body heat loss is a gradual process, and research shows that in calm water at 5°C a normally dressed person has only a 50% chance of surviving for one hour. Simple, self-help technique can extend this time, particularly if the person is wearing a life jacket.'

During distress singlas from Ships are