

Indian Women in Antarctic Expeditions A Historical Perspective

Arun Chaturvedi

Leader & Stn. Cdr. 19th Indian Antarctic Expedition
Geological Survey of India, Antarctica Division, Faridabad

One of the oldest national Antarctic endeavours, the Australian Antarctic Expedition, started their first regular station, "Mawson", for wintering teams in 1954. But it took them 27 years to send a woman to winter over in Antarctica, when they allowed a lady-doctor to winter in 1981. Now the websites of the Australian Antarctic Expeditions proudly display the highlights of all these "historical achievements."

Indian women have also contributed considerably in many Antarctic expeditions. The details of their participation, however, are scattered over many reports and scientific papers and are not easily traceable. With the passage of time, many expeditions later, these particulars would be more difficult to locate. In the 19th expedition, an Indian woman has wintered over in Antarctica and this occasion justifies a little note on this aspect, for the sake of the history of Indian polar expeditions.

The first wintering station of India was "Dakshin Gangotri", installed on the ice shelf. It was built in the 3rd Indian Antarctic Expedition in 1983-84, under the Leadership of Dr Harsh Gupta. This was also the first year of participation by Indian women in Antarctic expeditions. Dr Sudipta Sengupta and Dr Aditi Pant opened up new horizons, becoming members of the scientific team for the summer period. They contributed significantly in the fields of Geology and Oceanography, respectively. Both these pioneers were not satisfied with this achievement only, they Antarctica for a second time also; Dr Aditi Pant in the 5th expedition and Dr Sudipta Sengupta in the 9th expedition.

The second wintering station of India, "Maitri", was constructed during the 7th and 8th expeditions in 1987-88, on the rocky hills of Schirmacher Range and wintering teams started residing here since 1989. For the next one decade, the participation of Indian women continued intermittently, in summer periods, at this location. Many scientists from different institutions

Table 1: Participation of Women Scientists in Indian Antarctic Expeditions

Expedition	Year	Period	Name	Institution
3 rd IAE	1983-84	Summer	Dr Sudipta Sengupta	Jadavpur University, Jadavpur
3 rd IAE	1983-84	Summer	Dr Aditi Pant	National Institute of Oceanography, Goa
5 th IAE	1985-86	Summer	Dr Aditi Pant	National Institute of Oceanography, Goa
5 th IAE	1985-86	Summer	Ms Gowri Indresan	Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai
9 th IAE	1989-90	Summer	Dr Sudipta Sengupta	Jadavpur University, Jadavpur
9 th IAE	1989-90	Summer	Ms Rita Kohli	Delhi University, Delhi
10 th IAE	1990-91	Summer	Dr Usha Sachdeva	All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi
10 th IAE	1990-91	Summer	Ms Meenakshi Chatterji	Kolkata University, Kolkata
13 th IAE	1993-94	Summer	Dr Lokabharathi	National Institute of Oceanography, Goa
13 th IAE	1993-94	Summer	Ms Meenakshi Naidu	All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi
14 th IAE	1994-95	Summer	Dr Jaya Naithani	National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi
14 th IAE	1994-95	Summer	Ms S.R, Nair	National Environmental Engineering Research Laboratory, Nagpur
18 th IAE	1998-99	Summer	Dr Girija Rajaram	Indian Institute of Geomagnetism, Mumbai
18 th IAE	1998-99	Summer	Dr Manju Mehta	All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi
18 th IAE	1998-99	Summer	Dr Kusum Kapila	All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi
19 th IAE	1999-2000	Summer	Ms Nora Nelly	Lima University, Peru
19 th IAE	1999-2001	Winter	Dr Kanwal Vilku	Central Health Services, New Delhi

like AIIMS, NIO, NPL, IIG, NEERI and research-faculty from universities of Jadavpur, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai have enriched the Indian scientific research in varied fields. The details of their participation are given in Table 1.

All the above endeavours were, quite understandably, confined to the summer period only; wintering being considered too tough for women, primarily due to various inhibiting social factors. In the 19th expedition, this jinx was finally broken. Dr Kanwal Vilku, a 53 year old medical practitioner, wintered over with the team at Maitri station. She provided medical cover to the team from December 1999 to March 2001; opening up new vistas for Indian women in Antarctica. Also, in the same expedition, under International collaborative programme, a lady geologist from Peru participated during the summer period.

It may be mentioned that among the women participants, Dr Sudipta Sengupta, Dr Aditi Pant, Dr Jaya Naithani and Dr Kanwal Vilku have been honoured by "Antarctica Award" of the Govt. of India for their outstanding contributions to the Indian Antarctic Programme.