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'I did the Antarctica grind, like any other male scientist on the team': Geologist Sudipta Sengupta

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When Sudipta Sengupta decided to become a geologist and mountaineer in the sixties, both were virgin territories for Indian women. The 77-year-old, who was one of the first women in India's Antarctic expedition, talks to Srirupa Ray about her recent memoir, 'Breaking Rocks and Barriers'

How much is your memoir a chronicle of shattering the 'ice ceiling' as a female geologist?

Geology satisfied my adventurous spirit, my scientist's curiosity, and opened many doors for me. But only when I began classes at Jadavpur University in 1962 did I realise that this was a path very few women chose. I was one of two girls in the batch. The next

year, there were no women. When I joined the Geological Survey of India in 1969, there were only five women geologists among 2,000. Now, 50% are female. My mountaineering decision was also unusual for my time but I persevered and flourished. Looking back, I now feel I had shattered the 'ice ceiling' time and again, though unknowingly. The book is a chronicle of that journey.

You had seen how families were reluctant to enroll girls in mountaineering camps...

In 1968, when we organised a camp for girls, very few enrolled. Some dropped out as their parents objected, saying it was no place for a girl and that their wards would get sunburnt! Every time I came back from a trek,

someone or the other would taunt, “You’ve become burnt charcoal!” We were obsessed with skin colour then, we are obsessed with it even now. But today’s girls go for mountaineering and hiking trips more readily, and many even go solo.

What stumbling blocks did you face as a woman during the Antarctica expedition?

At first, they told us they were not considering female scientists. But then, I was interviewed and selected for the expedition. Despite my mountaineering experience and fieldwork in the Arctic region — which many of the male scientists in the group did not have — they thought of us as mere decorations. They didn’t really think we would take part in the real grind like the men did. But we did all the chores any expedition member was supposed to do — unloading stuff from the helicopter or the ship, carrying heavy boxes. I was tougher than many men there owing to my fieldwork days.

Tagore was a huge inspiration. You even sang one of his songs during the all-women trek to a virgin peak which you later named Lalana (woman)...

Tagore’s poem ‘Shadharan Meye’ (ordinary woman) had a deep impact on me, especially these lines — “I beg you please, write about an ordinary woman and her travails. How will she prove that even she has something extraordinary tucked away inside? How many would care to look deep enough to notice?” Indeed, how many noticed that we managed to summit Lalana (in Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh) in 1970 despite it being such a treacherous trek? We are still the only ones to have done so till now. And I am the only one living among the six-member crew. Two of our team members died while climbing down the peak and our triumph turned to tragedy.