

**PREETY SENGUPTA'S TRAVELOGUE *MY JOURNEY TO THE MAGNETIC NORTH POLE:*
A REFLECTION OF THE CHALLENGES OF THE ARCTIC LIFE**

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ABSTRACT

Preety Sengupta, a woman diasporic writer of Indian origin and resident of America, has to her credit eighteen books that chiefly include her travelogues and poem collections, majority of them written in Gujarati language. She is a living writer and recipient of more than seven awards conferred on her by Gujarat Sahitya Academy, Gujarati Sahitya Parishad and Gujarati literary academy of North America. She is an extensive traveler who has visited seventy countries, some more than once. She has voyaged through all the seven continents of the world and narrated her fascinating experiences in the form of travelogues.

The present paper focusses on Preety's arduous journey to the Magnetic North Pole, engulfed from all sides with thick layers of snow. It is considered to be the most challenging and perilous place to be travelled by a woman alone. The purpose of the paper is to describe the unnerving experiences of Preety; her observations regarding the lifestyle, customs, and traditions of people, Arctic animals and the kind of vegetation growing there.

Keywords: batik, macramé, Rabindra sangeet, Vighnaharta (destroyer of difficulties), lichen, Thule, Inukshuk, Intuit, igloo, ski-doo.

PREETY'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Born on 17th May, 1945 in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Preety Sengupta loved reading from the formative years of her life. She learnt idealism from her father who was a chartered accountant by profession and a sense of aesthetics from her mother. She lost her father when she was only five and her mother before she could flower into a traveler, a poet and a writer. Proficient in a number of languages, Preety knew Hindi, Sanskrit, and English besides her mother tongue Gujarati. She also learnt the art of batik, macramé, photography, Chinese brush painting, belly-dancing, Rabindra Sangeet and Ghazal

singing. She was an avid reader and wrote both prose and poetry for the school and college magazines since her early years. She procured a Master's Degree in English literature and taught for some time in a local college in Ahmedabad. Then she went to America for further studies where she met a Bengali student named Chandan Sengupta, a genuinely caring and highly dependable person whom she eventually married in New York. Basically shy by temperament, Preety remarks, *"This was the most important decision of my life that I had taken on my own."*

LOVE FOR TRAVELLING

Preety was fond of travelling from the very beginning of her life. But her urge of travelling intensified after her marriage with Chandan Sengupta as she became a permanent resident of America. Her love for motherland India made her extremely critical of America. She therefore decided to explore America; understand it by seeing all the places in and around it thoroughly. She exclaims, *"From then on I have continued to travel – everywhere, often around India, around America, and quite see the local way of life at close quarters"*. She journeyed from England to Greece, Scandinavia, Spain, France and Austria. She continued her *"bolder journeys"*, travelled alone and gradually realized that *"the inevitable moments of loneliness were infrequent and short-lived. Mostly there was pure joy, a feeling of harmony with the surroundings"*. Her husband also supported and encouraged her passion of travelling; he allowed her to travel around the world. She kept on travelling and continued pouring her experiences into essays and poems. She published a number of books and won several literary prizes.

By 1988, she had visited many countries such as Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas, South Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, South America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. She had journeyed extensively and travelled in all the seven continents. But her desire to reach the unreachable, still existed. Her obsession to look at the maps and atlases made her realize that a huge area of High Arctic is yet to be travelled and she made up her mind to go on an expedition to the Magnetic North Pole.

VOYAGE TO THE MAGNETIC NORTH POLE

The more Preety learnt about it, the more she felt the pull to go there. The year 1992 was the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus who discovered the Western world and therefore she made up her mind to coincide the greatest journey of her life with the anniversary of Columbus. In spite of realizing the dangers associated with the trip, she decided to undertake the journey. With her husband's support and innate faith in God, she started her journey. She carried with her a small statue of Lord Ganesh – *Vighnaharta* (Destroyer of difficulties) for good luck.

THE TOUGH JOURNEY

Preety began the trip from New York City to Montreal by plane. After a little while, the signs of civilization disappeared and the plane flew over the Eastern Arctic snow. Everything was frozen and appeared snowy white. Even from vast distance above, *“the shapes could be differentiated – the ripples, frozen waves, stunned rivers, mummified canyons”*. As the plane arrived at Resolute, there appeared a small cluster of houses, located amidst the silvery snow and a long road passing from the village towards the small airport. Bezal and Terry were the organizers of the trip. The passengers were taken to the lodge located seven kilometers from the airport. Preety was introduced to other four people who were going to the Magnetic North Pole with her. She was excited to have the company of fellow travelers of different nationalities She was an Indian, other four were Hans (German), Pascal (Swiss), Anthony (Irish) and David, a Chinese, a British citizen residing in London. Preety was the only woman in the group of seasoned travelers. As regards the age of the travelers, Preety was in her early forties; Pascal at 30 was the youngest in the group who worked in a bank in a small town in Switzerland; Hans was 69 and did not move around much for walks due to a leg broken in a car accident; David, about 52 was a dentist; and Anthony, in late thirties worked in a factory and normally lived with his parents.

All the travelers were clad in heavy windproof jackets, knee-high boots made from horse-leather and a thick pair of leather mittens before they stepped out of the lodge. Preety wore three pairs of socks and two pairs of gloves, yet her fingers were stiffening with cold. The atmosphere was chilling; the cold was biting and the situation extremely challenging. It was inevitable to wear dark glasses because the sun’s glare reflecting off the snow could be blinding. Preety recounts her experience, *“Two layers of gloves did not keep fingers from freezing, but without them, within thirty seconds, our fingers would turn wooden and start aching”*. Even the sleeping bags were stuffed with fine leathers. In addition to this, the travelers wore wind-pants in bright-blue and a parka jacket. The boots were so heavy that walking became extremely strenuous and lifting a boot was an effort. Preety reiterates, *“Equipped in these layers, we were slow and robot-like in our movements. Sometimes when walking, we lost balance and slipped on the snow”*. In spite of being well insulated, the distressing cold caused by the Arctic wind had brought the temperature down to below minus 45 degree Fahrenheit, and the lashing wind was *“slapping my face, pushing me, and whipping me around”*.

LIFE INDOORS

The lodge in which the travelers stayed was simple but quite well maintained. There was a substantial collection of books and videos on the Arctic people, life, animals, handicrafts and photographs

and maps of the region on the walls. The language used by these people was "*Inuktitut*" and the word used for Magnetic North Pole was "*Nippirkangnaq*" meaning "*something that sticks*". The people of Arctic island were called "*Intuit*" which means "*people*". There were about 165 people who lived in the hamlet of Resolute; they had adapted themselves to the surroundings so well that they appeared quite comfortable with the sea-ice and rugged coast.

LIFE OUTDOORS

The atmosphere surrounding the lodge was highly unpredictable. Day and Night had no meaning here. It was merely "*waking time*" and "*sleeping time*". In summer, the sun blazed at mid night, and during winter, the moon shone at noon. It appeared as if it was an "*upside down world*". Several miles away from the village Resolute was located a site called the "*Thule Site*" - a small patch of brown, thin, dry grass, and bright red dots of lichen. The place was buried under four feet of snow when the travelers were taken. There existed at this place small animals such as lemmings as well as sparse vegetation. Thousands of years ago when nomadic men roamed this region, they stayed at these places and built house out of stones and whale bones. Their culture was called "*Thule*" (pronounced as thoo-lee). Not very far from this place was situated two "*Inukshuk*" (pronounced as Inookshook) stones stacked to look like men. This was an ancient Thule practice. These stones were said to be five hundred years old. Out of the two, one "stone-man" was intact while the other had been battered by the lashes of time.

The travelers went to a place called Fossil Hill – a place replete with ancient fossils. The atmosphere was windy and the climate was freezing. While roaming with fellow travelers, Preety found a fossilized snail on which she was about to step on. She was thrilled to learn that the fossil belonged to the Lower Palaeozoic Era, which confirmed the existence of life more than five million years ago. This precious finding compensated all the discomforts she had experienced until now. The travelling party moved to a small hill island called Beechy Island situated in the middle of the High Arctic Ocean. This was the place where the famous Franklin Expedition met its tragic end. The ship containing 129 crewmen, supplies sufficient for three years and 1500 books, was stuck in the ocean as the water around it was frozen. The ship disappeared into the ocean and could not be traced.

JOURNEY FROM RESOLUTE TO THE MAGNETIC NORTH POLE

The organizers of the expedition had arranged the onward journey from Resolute to the Magnetic North Pole by sledge and the return journey to Resolute by plane. Five sledges were prepared among which one was shared by Preety and Pascal while the rest by other travelers. Each sledge was attached

with a sturdy plastic rope about three meters long to a snow mobile called a “ski-doo”. The ski-doo’s were bright yellow with black seats and black handlebars. None had the idea how the expedition would go. Any mishap or breakdown of a machine or bad weather might end their lives. Preety remembers, *“We all had smiles on our faces, but I am sure, a prayer in our hearts”*. She was dressed in all her Arctic regalia with twelve things on including gloves and socks. The snow appeared soft but was hard and rough. The temperature was minus 30 to 35 degree Fahrenheit and the lashing wind was making the atmosphere even more chilling. It was all white around and the scene was stunningly beautiful. What appeared even more exciting were the *“Sun dogs”* that had been moving with the sun behind them. After getting out of the sledge, Preety noticed that these were *“fake suns”* surrounding the real sun. These *“sun-dogs”* were created when ice crystals caught the sun’s reflection. The experience was simply awesome.

ARCTIC ANIMALS AND VEGETATION

The ski-doo containing Preety and Pascal was driven by Peter who suddenly stopped the ski-doo. His trained eyes spotted something like a white shadow on the white expanse up to the hill. It was a white wolf, *“the graceful king of the Arctic animals”*. Preety was thrilled to see the animals because she knew that wildlife photographers spent weeks trying to capture the white wolf and the polar bear and yet could not locate them. She considered herself fortunate for being able to see the animals roaming in their natural habitat. She also had an opportunity to see the beasts with huge bodies and rich dark fur of beautiful brown colour. They seemed like big bulls. They were in fact musk oxen that grazed in the area round Bathurst Island. There was also sign of vegetation growing in the place. Many tiny dry twigs of two inch height, with peppercorn sized flowers were found. The entire atmosphere was so lively that it showed as if the snow had life. Preety exclaims, *“When I walked, it cracked and it heaved. Its texture varied, its taste varied. It looked as beautiful as a smile. I could see tiny air bubbles trapped inside blocks of ice. I had no doubt that this was living, breathing snow.”* All the travelers were mesmerized to see this extraordinary mysterious world.

THE LAST TWO DAYS

On the last two days, the group travelled within the radius of the Magnetic North Pole. Pascal had brought a compass with him. But its needle went *“mad”* because it was *“home”*. They were at the centre of the Earth’s magnetic field. There was a lot of trapped ice in that area. *“There were pints and pinnacles, piles and mounds, scoops and steeples of snow”*. The place was such that even the sledges were unable to make their way through this icy upheaval, thus their journey by ski-doo’s ended. The travellers reached the unique spot - *“Magnetic North Pole”*. *“The Canadian flag flew on top of the staff, and on either side the*

colourful flags of five countries were hung – German, Chinese, Swiss, Irish and Indian. It was an extremely emotional moment for all. The group members congratulated one another, took photographs in many combinations – with the drivers, without them, alone, sitting, standing at the top of the mound. Preety placed the statue of Ganesh on a high slab of ice and the dry petals of roses on it. She ecstatically asserts: “Two things meant a lot for me – to have reached the Pole – as an Indian – and to have carried the roses there as a symbol of my husband’s love.”

On the last evening, the light was gentle and golden. Just before they left Resolute, Preety saw a bird flying in the sky. *“It seemed as if from the distant hills, a bird had flown out specially to say good bye.”*

CONCLUSION

Preety Sengupta, the most adventurous and fearless woman writer considers her expedition to the Magnetic North Pole to be the most exhilarating and fascinating experience. She not only observed the scenic beauty of the place minutely but also explored the history, culture, life style and traditions of people residing there. She tried to preserve her experiences in the photographs that she clicked at various times during her journey. Her reminiscences find expression in her rich collection of travelogues and poems written by her from time to time.

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