

Kalpana Chawla

One Among the Global Seven

Tragedy has again struck in a major disaster which ended the lives of seven brave astronauts including Kalpana Chawla from India, when the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated on the 1st February on re-entry into the earth's atmosphere minutes before landing. The tragedy is too personal for India, as she has now lost the only astronaut and a brave lady of great promise.

Kalpana was born on 1st July 1961 in Karnal, in the State of Haryana, India. She came from an ordinary middle class family, the youngest of three girls. Completing her schooling from Tagore Bal Niketan School in 1976 she did her BE in Aeronautical Engineering from Punjab Engineering College at Chandigarh in 1982. She had from early childhood a passion for flying and wanted to be a navigator. After a visit to Karnal Flying School, J.R.D. Tata the ace pilot of India became her hero.



Kalpana left for USA for higher studies and got the MS degree in Aerospace Engineering in 1984 from the University of Texas. She later obtained a Ph.D. in Aerospace Engineering from the University of Colorado in 1988 and because of her love for flying obtained a commercial pilot's license and could fly from a glider to multi-engine airplanes. She got married to British-born husband Jean-Pierre Harrison, a flying instructor and became an American citizen.

Soon after securing her doctoral degree, Kalpana joined NASA Ames Research Centre and concentrated on research. She was selected by NASA in December 1994 as an astronaut candidate after severe tests and she made a mark in her first flight in 1997. She traveled 6.5 million miles in 252 orbits of the earth and logged 376 hours and 34 minutes in space!

She never identified herself as an Indian among the crew of seven. 'When you are in space and

look at the stars and galaxies you feel you do not belong to any particular piece of land but one from the solar system' was her comment. In January 2003 she was assigned to fly for the second time in space shuttle Columbia. There were seven members, five from America, one from Israel and Kalpana. These constituted the brave seven.

NASA has sent five space shuttles so far: Atlantis, Challenger, Discovery, Endeavour and the present Columbia. Of these Challenger was lost in 1986. Columbia is the oldest shuttle of NASA. The present was its last and 28th flight. With not an accident happening during decent or landing in the last four decades, flying of a shuttle had become a routine affair. Star-crossed fleet of seven astronauts were lost on their return journey full of joyful anticipation of meeting members of their family, friends and well wishers on landing.

Kalpana was an artist and loved music and carried with her 20 CDs including those of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Ravi Shankar, Hari Prasad Chaurasia and Abida Parveen. Chawla's intention was to send the CDs to the respective artists stating that their music had accompanied her on the flight aboard the Columbia. The last message she sent was in verse

*Sapnon se safaltd ka janevale raste hai,
Bas usse dekhne ke zarurat hai,
Oos raste per sankalp se chalna ki*

There is a way to realize your dreams
You only need to have the vision, the courage
And determination to tread that path

A memorial service was held at the Meenakshi Temple in Peerland, Texas on Sunday night attended by B.L. Chawla, father of Kalpana and Suneeta Chawla, her sister. A special meeting was held in the Indian Parliament under the presidentship of Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee when floral tributes were paid to the departed soul. The Indian meteorological satellite METSAT was named Kalpana and dedicated to the nation.

President Bush in his tribute said 'None of our astronauts travelled a longer path in space than Kalpana Chawla. She left India as a student, but she would see the nation of her birth, all of it from hundreds of miles above'. When the sad news reached her home town, an administrator at her high school remarked: 'she always said she wanted to reach the stars'. She went there and beyond.

In the normal course of events Kalpana would have distinguished herself as an astronaut and earned many laurels but the manner of her death and its suddenness deeply affected the entire nation. She has become doubly dear and will remain as a precious memory for a long time to come.

'To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.'

B.P. RADHAKRISHNA