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## Kalpana Chawla

*"KC" defied father, left home to pursue a dream*

Kalpana Chawla told her father that she wanted to study aerospace engineering, and he scoffed. She should be a doctor or teacher, he told her.

"That was a more respectable profession," she recalled.

Chawla's father wouldn't go with her when she went to interview at an Indian engineering school. Instead, her mother accompanied her to the college, where a male professor told her that engineering wasn't "ladylike."

However, Chawla didn't let sexism or even the lack of an aerospace program in her native India discourage her. She emigrated to the United States, earned a doctoral degree in aerospace engineering and — against all odds — became an astronaut.

"For me, it's really far-fetched to have thought about it and made it," Chawla said. "It's almost like having won a lottery or something."

The 41-year-old engineer was returning from her second shuttle mission. Known as "KC" around NASA, Chawla became the second person from India to fly in space in 1997.

Born in Karnal, India, to a wealthy family that owned a local rubber-manufacturing plant, Chawla dedicated herself to engineering.

"I don't know why I always liked aerospace engineering," she said. "I was in the 10th grade when I figured that's what I wanted to do."

Chawla earned an aeronautical degree from the Punjab Engineering College in 1982. While getting her degree, she read a book about the famed Lockheed "Skunkworks" plant in California, where new space vehicles are designed. She applied to U.S. schools for her advanced degrees and stayed in the United States.



NASA / GETTY IMAGES

Kalpana Chawla looks over a procedures checklist last week in the research module aboard the space shuttle Columbia. Chawla was the second person from her native India to fly into space.

### KALPANA CHAWLA

**Position:** Mission specialist

**Age:** 41

**Hometown:** Karnal, India

**Education:** Bachelor of science in aeronautical engineering, Punjab Engineering College, India, 1982; master of science in aerospace engineering, University of Texas, 1984; doctorate of philosophy in aerospace engineering, University of Colorado, 1988

**Family:** Married.

**Spaceflight experience:** STS-87 in 1997

**Fact:** She is an avid pilot and enjoys flying aerobatics.

After earning a master's from the University of Texas in 1984, she went to the University of Colorado for her doctorate. There, she met professor C.Y. Chow, who had a job available doing NASA research in complex fluid dynamics. It was a perfect fit.

"In the classroom, she was an excellent student and also she did excellent research," Chow said. "And outside she was very active, hiking and flying."

Chawla began work on aircraft physics at NASA's Ames Research Center in 1988 after completing her doctoral studies. She became an American citizen in 1990 and in 1993 joined Overset Methods as a vice president studying aerodynamics.

In 1994, she was chosen as an astronaut. She made her first space flight in 1997 on a shuttle mission that did research on the effects of weightlessness, studied the sun's outer atmosphere and retrieved a science satellite.

— *Michael Cabbage, The Orlando Sentinel*

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