

Tributes to Dr. Chawla

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• • An e-mail message from **T.P. Sreenivasan**, an Indian diplomat who had interacted with Kalpana Chawla when he was the deputy Indian ambassador to the United States. He is currently India's ambassador to Austria.

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Date: Sat, 01 Feb 2003 18:40:49 +0000

Friends:

When the first image of Space Shuttle Columbia, showing multiple trails, appeared on the screen a little while ago, my first thought was the hope that Kalpana Chawla was not on board that flight. I had read somewhere that she was going to fly a second time, but did not realise that she was actually on this particular flight. My worst fears were confirmed within minutes and I stood still with a prayer on my lips for the only Indian American astronaut.

I cannot say I knew her, but I had the honour to represent her motherland at the Kennedy Space Centre when she flew into space the first time in 1997. I went to Florida with two of our scientists at the invitation of NASA to witness the first Indian American blasting off to explore the mysteries of space. She was already in isolation from the rest of the world when we reached and NASA arranged for me to watch her board the capsule and to talk to her on phone after she was inside, ready for the launch. I wished her the best on behalf of the people and the Government of India and said how proud we were that she was selected to undertake this flight. She recalled her younger days in India and said she was glad that India sent me to Florida to witness the launch even though she was no longer an Indian citizen. I said that India remained proud of her children even after they migrated abroad and that the basic education she received in India must have stood her in good stead when she came to the US. She agreed that it was the solid science education in India that got her interested in space. Later, I worked with NASA to arrange a conversation between our Prime Minister and her when she was still in space. We tried to get her to the Embassy to felicitate her and she once called to ask whether India would invite the whole crew of her shuttle to India. Everything was set for both, but somehow neither of the two materialized. I do not know whether she visited India on her own after her fly

The next and only time I met her was in Sept 2000 when Vice President Al Gore invited her to have lunch with Prime Minister Vajpayee at the State Department. She was at the head table, but I walked up to her and spoke briefly about my presence at the Kennedy Centre just before she took off on her space odyssey. The fact that "India Today" put her on the cover of its special issue on the achievements of overseas Indians is a measure of the recognition of the accomplishments of the girl from Karnal. India was as proud of her as of many overseas Indians who soared high and brought glory to the nation. When I read

Ode for Kalpana By Ambassador Robert D. Blackwill

(Blackwill, who has taught poetry at university, is U.S. Ambassador to India.)

With years as first in her class
She knew the fears?
That if you ask too much of it
Metal shrieks, tears,
Falls apart in pieces.
A technical fact to her.
All the world to us.

Fire consumes a nation's heart.
This Karnal girl sought the skies.
Space shuttles whispered in her ear
And she answered head to feet.

We keep her smile in that last video.
Like Seneca, she thought
"The whole universe is my native land."

Now more than ever, dear one.
We weep