

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Kalpana Chawla, Astronaut, 1961-2003

With an honors degree from an engineering college in India, Kalpana Chawla hoped to attend graduate school at The University of Texas at Arlington, but her father was away on an extended business trip and could not give permission. Only days before fall term 1982 began, he returned to find her in tears. “Papa, you have destroyed my career. You never have time for me!”¹

He quickly arranged for a passport and visa, and his headstrong daughter flew to Texas to begin a brilliant career. Kalpana earned a master’s degree in aeronautical engineering from The University of Texas at Arlington, married a flight instructor whom she met in Texas, completed a Ph.D. from the University of Colorado, passed her pilot’s exams, and received U.S. citizenship. Her first job was with NASA conducting research into fluid dynamics.

In 1995 Kalpana entered the astronaut training program in Houston, one of 19 candidates accepted from 2,962 applicants.² Within three years she flew as a mission specialist on Space Shuttle Columbia, the first woman from India in space. Kalpana performed complex research duties onboard, but described the flight in terms of wonder:

*In the pre-sleep period, when you’re looking out the window, you’re floating. You see the continents go by, the thunderstorms shimmering in the clouds, the city lights at night. The Nile River looks like a lifeline in the Sahara. And we looked down on Mount Everest. Earth is very beautiful. I wish everyone could see it.*³

Assigned to a second space mission in 2003, Kalpana exclaimed, “Doing it again is like living a dream, a good dream once again.”⁴ She perished along with the rest of the crew when Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated over Texas as it re-entered the earth’s atmosphere.

A vegetarian, Kalpana felt special affinity for creatures that fly and left \$300,000 to the Audubon Society.⁵



Photo

NASA.

Endnotes

¹ Banarsi Lal Chawla, interviewed in Josy Joseph, “The Chawlas’ Odyssey,” *The Rediff Special*, February 7, 2003, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/feb/01spec.htm> (May 18, 2005).

² Kalpana Chawla: Destined for the Stars,” *Trinetizen Media*, February 4, 2003, <http://www.trinetizen.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=354> (May 18, 2005).

³ “Out of This World: Space Shuttle Columbia crew member Kalpana Chawla is the second University of Texas at Arlington graduate to travel in space,” *University of Texas at Arlington Magazine*, Spring/Summer 1998, *UTA College of Engineering E-News*, <http://www.uta.edu/engineering/news/astronauts/chawla/chawlalong.php> (May 18, 2005).

⁴ “Kalpana Chawla: Destined for the Stars,” *Trinetizen Media*, February 4, 2003, <http://www.trinetizen.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=354> (May 18, 2005); also in “National Audubon Society establishes the Kalpana Chawla Fund for Environmental Stewardship,” National Audubon Society press release October 29, 2003, http://www.audubon.org/news/press_releases/1003-KalpanaChawla.html (May 18, 2005).

⁵ “National Audubon Society establishes the Kalpana Chawla Fund for Environmental Stewardship,” National Audubon Society press release October 29, 2003, http://www.audubon.org/news/press_releases/1003-KalpanaChawla.html (May 18, 2005).