

Chiranjeev Singh: The 'space man'

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Based in Illinois, Chicago, Dr. Chiranjeev "Baboo" Kathuria was born to a Sikh family, but had to constantly explain why he wore a turban to justify his Indianness in America. "I was a complete loser in college, not only in popularity but with girls as well," Baboo recalls his early days in the USA.

However, as things have turned out, neither his early unpopularity at Brown University nor turban could block Baboo's fantastic journey.

A *Newsweek* article by Gersh Kuntzman says, "Now exactly 20 years later, the very same man is running for the US Senate from Illinois – not as the loveable loser I once knew, but as an incredibly successful businessman, with a personal wealth estimated at \$100 million, and who once dated Miss India."

Baboo's odyssey began on a note of "weakness", which actually helped make "me become stronger". His parents always taught Baboo of the "the importance of education". And today despite his "terrible campus memories", Baboo's shown enough calibre to be called a successful entrepreneur. This 30-something man heads a billion-dollar empire and is also known as an efficient physician, set to run for Lt. Governor in Chicago, Illinois.

Recently, he made headlines when his love for space led him to join forces with Geoff Sheerin, president of Canadian Arrow, to form a new corporation called Planet Space, which will soon complete its construction and start testing its first sub-orbital rocket, Canadian Arrow. "The corporation's goal, he says, "is to make space flight a viable proposition for the public in the next 24 months."

Planet Space expects to fly almost 2,000 new astronauts in the first five years and earn \$200 million from sub-orbital flights by the fifth year. Fares will start at \$250,000, including a 14-day training programme.

"For a rocket, it takes only four to six seconds after the blast-off before it cross the space barrier, and once it's in that sub-orbital height, a one can feast his eyes on mother earth for 34-45 minutes," says Baboo.

He is no stranger to space flights and also the founder director of MirCorp, the company that made history in 2000 by launching the world's first privately-funded space programme.

MirCorp is a joint venture with RSC Energia that launched the first satellite (Sputnik). They sent the first man to orbit the earth and is now a major partner of the International Space Station. "MirCorp was the beginning of the opening of space for the general public and Planet Space will be the next "flight" that will provide a wonderful range of opportunities from sub-orbital jaunts to "possible" weeklong journeys in space," says Chiranjeev.

His mother is physician, who worked for the Veterans Administration Hospital in Hines, Illinois for over 30 years, while his father is a qualified engineer.

In 1993, Baboo met a beauty, half Latino and half Danish. "I instantly fell in love with her. And when she told me of her plans to set up a cell phone business India, I had hardly any choice but to say, 'yes'," he recounts his days of romancing.

Baboo admits that initially it was his heart that guided his actions. The relationship didn't quite last long. "But it wasn't really a misadventure, for it was since that time that my business sense really started getting sharpened," he says.

After achieving "some success" in setting up a number of innovative businesses, including American Teleradiology, Nighthawks, and X-Stream Networks, Inc., Baboo helped build Morgan Stanley's Investment Banking operations in India.

But if you think that Planet Space marks the end of his journey, you are grossly mistaken.

His company is holding final rounds of discussions with partners to set up what America is obsessed about: A Reality Television Show set in space.

“Things didn’t happen overnight. I worked very hard, even on some days slept in London cabs,” says Chiranjeev.

“Indians have great potential but lack unity. It is high time they all stood united as Indians, not as Hindu, Muslims, Sikhs, Gujaratis or Bengalis,” he says.

He also recounts the days when his parents migrated from Canada to Chicago in the 1950s and how they would be thrilled to see an Indian.

“They’d invite each other for a *desi* meal and later hang a bed-spread in the basement to play a reel of some Hindi movie,” he says. “What a change from now to then.

Today there is neither any shortage of *desi* faces nor opportunities. Chiranjeev describes America as a “fruit salad” that embraces all ethnic entities, their values and cultures. Despite a very busy schedule and multiple roles to play, he never misses out on his morning jog.

His inspiration is Robert Frost, especially the poet’s famous lines: “*The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep...*”

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