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## NORTH AMERICA SPECIAL: LIVING

### Forward March

Inspired by their love for action, adventure and America, an increasing number of Indians are opting for a career in the armed forces

By Mabel Pais

Like many second generation Indian Americans, Rupa Joshi Dainer began dreaming of a medical career while in high school. But unlike others, her aspirations had an idealistic dimension unaccompanied, however, by the regular ambitions to serve leprosy patients or work in shanty towns. "I wanted to be a doctor serving a very special group: people who are defending us day and night," says Dainer.

A student at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Services, Maryland, Dainer says she has come across many young Indians who, like her, are also bound for a medical career with the armed forces. "In my case, there was an additional incentive," she says. It comes in the form of her father, Rupendra Kumar Joshi, a retired Indian Navy officer. A lone daughter, Dainer says, "The notion that women cannot do certain things doesn't exist in my family." And there's a societal misconception that she seeks to set right. "It is not true that doctors and engineers in the armed forces do not face danger. We could be right behind the battle lines or in a temporary military hospital nearby ... we too risk our lives," she asserts.



**PROUD TO SERVE:** The family encourages Sheetal (third from right) who has joined parents T.G. and Usha Patel in service

Anu Bhagwati, the only child of Columbia University economists Jagdish and Padma, decided to join the United States Marines last year-the toughest and most demanding of all American armed forces. Though women marines do not participate in combat, they face most of the risks their male counterparts run. For they are also sent to the combat zone. "I would have joined any other branch of the armed forces but I wanted to go where one is tested the maximum," says Bhagwati, a Yale University graduate. "Like any other young American she had made her choice," says her father.

Indeed, as the Indian American population swells, the number joining

the armed forces increases proportionately, says Captain

### NRI DIARY

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Dr T.G. Patel, founder of the Indian American Post of American Legion, who retired recently as director of medical services at the Norfolk Navy Hospital. "But surely more people could join," he says. Estimating some 250 members of the Indian American community in the American services, Patel hopes to inspire more. "We ought to network with each other, know what we are doing and inspire others to follow our example," says Patel, married to a doctor who also serves in the US forces. Their daughter, Sheetal, is a lieutenant in the reserves and is currently posted at the embassy in New Delhi.

Patel, who joined the naval unit about 25 years ago, says people like him who offered to serve the armed forces within a few years of their arrival in the US were, in a way, rebutting a false notion that immigrants cared only about taking things from America. "We know to give back," he emphasises, "and in deciding to serve the armed forces, we were sending the signal that we belong to this country, that we are here to stay and that this is our country, too."

After the September 11 terrorist attacks on America, the loyalty of many immigrants is silently questioned. Patel and many other Indians believe one visible proof of commitment to the US that could dispel all such doubts and apprehensions is serving in its armed forces. Besides, the thrill of fighting for the adopted country in itself imparts a strong sense of assimilation, as Colonel (ret'd) C. Alex Alexander and Ravindra Shah, commander of the New York Air National Guard, concur. Both are medical doctors and agree that they did not feel they really belonged to America till they began their stints with the armed forces. But there was no such compulsion for Shibby Chacko, who was recently commissioned as a lieutenant in the National Guards. He isn't there to prove his loyalty-for apart from his complexion and name, he is as American as the apple pie.

While a decade ago, most of the Indians in the US armed forces were doctors who were never involved in combat, servicemen like Captain Ravi Chaudhary gradually made headway. Chaudhary ranks among the new generation of recruits who are being trained for combat. He says that though Indian Americans are currently like the tip of the spear, they are beginning to play important roles. Ask him why he decided to join the armed forces and he retorts: "Because I love aircraft, action and America!"

Among the veterans who have set an example to the younger generations are a number of doctors, including General (ret'd) Surendra Bhaskar, who has a PhD in pathology from University of Chicago. What he remembers more than the adventure is his passion to serve his adopted country-in fact, he had volunteered to join the American armed forces even when he was pursuing a dental degree from Northwestern University. "In my moment of passion, I did not realise that I was not an American citizen," Bhaskar chuckles. But he succeeded in realising his dream following his marriage to an American. And while this doctor had originally planned only a short stint in the services, he just stayed on.

Patel, too, recalls the time when he divulged his plans to his friends and told them about his ambition. "Some of them thought I was crazy. But I knew what I was going to do," he smiles. "I had a whale of a dream career. Some people looked at me thinking what this IMG (International Medical Graduate) was doing," the smile turns into indulgent laughter. Patel, who was recently inducted as a master at the American College of Physicians, adds, "I knew better. I had paid my dues, and I have been amply rewarded and recognised."

For all that, there are still parents who are dead against the idea of their children risking their lives. Says a 17-year-old New Yorker, "I want to join the marines, I want to go to places where very few Indians have ventured ... but my parents are dead against the idea." For the young man, who was born in America, it is not just patriotism that draws him to the marines. "I will get a fantastic education. And some day, I would like to run for a public office. And if you haven't put yourself in the harm's way for this country, you cannot really



**NOBLE CALLING:** Lt Shibby Chacko with his parents; Rupa with husband Hugh Dainer dressed for a Navy Ball (below)

**For many, joining its services is a proof of commitment to the US.**

succeed in public life."

If that is his driving force, others will perhaps get direction from Bhaskar's advice: "The armed forces are wonderful for career advancement. And what's more, you don't have to worry about your religion or caste. You can truly belong there."



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