

Richard Branson takes off first in space tourism race

Bandla becomes third Indian-origin woman to fly into space

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Swashbuckling entrepreneur Richard Branson hurtled into space aboard his own winged rocket ship on Sunday in his boldest adventure yet, beating out fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos.

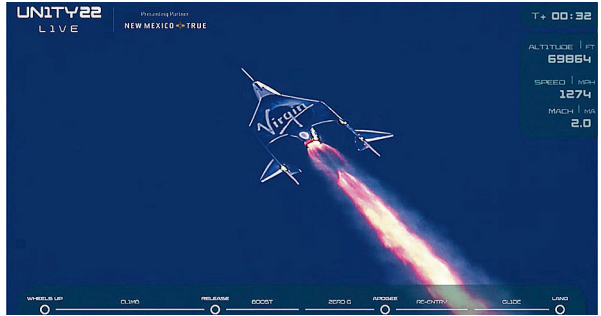
The nearly 71-year-old Mr. Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space tourism company, including Indian-origin aeronautical engineer Sirisha Bandla, reached an altitude of about 88 kilometres over the New Mexico desert – enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and see the curvature of the earth – and then safely glided back home to a runway landing.

“Seventeen years of hard work to get us this far,” a jubilant Mr. Branson said as he congratulated his team on the trip back aboard the sleek white space plane, named Unity.

Ms. Bandla became the third Indian-origin woman to fly into space after Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams. Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma is the only Indian citizen to travel in space.

The brief, up-and-down flight – the rocket ship’s portion took only about 15 minutes, or about as long as Alan Shepard’s first U.S. spaceflight in 1961 – was intended as a confidence-boosting plug for Virgin Galactic, which plans to start taking paying customers on joyrides next year.

Mr. Branson became the first person to blast off in his own spaceship, beating Mr. Bezos by nine days. He also became only the second septuagenarian to depart for space. (Astronaut John Glenn flew on the shuttle at



Escaping gravity: Passenger rocket plane VSS Unity starts its ascent to the edge of space on Sunday. ■ REUTERS

age 77 in 1998.) With about 500 people watching, including Mr. Branson’s family, a twin-fuselage aircraft with his space plane attached underneath took off in the first stage of the flight. The space plane then detached from the mother ship at an altitude of about 13 kilometres and fired its engine, reaching more than Mach 3, or three times the speed of sound, as it pierced the edge of space. The crowd cheered as it touched down on the runway.

Bezos and Musk

The flamboyant, London-born founder of Virgin Atlantic Airways wasn’t supposed to fly until later this summer. But he assigned himself to an earlier flight after Mr. Bezos announced plans to ride his own rocket into space from Texas on July 20, the 52nd anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. Mr. Branson denied he was trying to outdo Mr. Bezos.

One of Mr. Branson’s chief rivals in the space-tourism race among the world’s richest men, SpaceX’s Elon Musk, arrived in New Mexico to witness the flight, wishing Mr. Branson via Twitter, “Godspeed!”

Mr. Bezos likewise sent his wishes for a safe and suc-

cessful flight, though he also took to Twitter to enumerate the ways in which he believes his company’s rides will be better.

Mr. Bezos’ Blue Origin company intends to send tourists past the so-called Karman line 100 kilometres above earth, which is recognised by international aviation and aerospace federations as the threshold of space. But NASA, the Air Force, the Federal Aviation Administration and some astrophysicists consider the boundary between the atmosphere and space to begin 80 kilometres up.

Ever the showman, Mr. Branson insisted on a global livestream of the Sunday morning flight and invited celebrities and former space station astronauts to the company’s Spaceport America base in New Mexico. R&B singer Khalid performed his new single “New Normal” – a nod to the dawning of space tourism – while CBS “Late Show” host Stephen Colbert served as the event’s master of ceremonies.

Virgin Galactic already has more than 600 reservations from would-be space tourists, with tickets initially costing \$250,000 apiece. Blue Origin is waiting for Mr. Bezos’ flight before announcing its ticket prices.