Eminent Personalities

A valuable piece of writing about an extraordinary couple. This write-up by Anurag Rudra affords us to get glimpses into the life of the celebrated NASA astronaut Mike Fincke and his Assamese wife Renita Saikia. Anurag is able to hold our attention from beginning to end as we are acquainted with different facets of this couple.

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Flying to Space and Back

Anurag Rudra

“The North-east is a really wonderful place, a piece of heaven on earth. The people are so loving, simple and I am really grateful to all of them for the love, warmth and affection which they have
showered on me. *Bhal lagise.* I am thankful to my wife Renita, because of whom I could experience the ways and customs of the vibrant Asomiya culture,” so began my tete-a-tete with Col. Edward Michael Fincke aka Mike Fincke, American astronaut and commander of Expedition18 aboard the International Space Station, and his wife, Renita Saikia. More popularly, he is known as *Axomor Juwai* or ‘The Son in Law of Assam,’ being married to Renita, a NASA engineer herself, whose parents shifted to the States. Renita was born and brought up in the States where she was educated and she fondly recalls how she burnt the midnight oil to make it to the hallowed corridors of NASA: “I had to work really hard. Was fortunate that my parents could give me a good education and I too, put in my best effort. I remember how I used to toil in *Math* and science, and now, looking back after all these years, it is a wonderful feeling to see destiny’s hands shaping up your life in such a splendid manner,” recalls the NASA engineer who loves Bihu as much as rocket science.

*Michael Fincke juggling apples in space, photo courtesy of NASA.*

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Her husband and soul mate and the man of the moment, Mike, a veteran astronaut of two long duration missions aboard the International Space Station, has won laurels for himself for his stupendous performance and track record. I had the opportunity to interact with Mike when he came to Assam as a part of a twelve day tour of the North-east organised by the Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS), an international think tank which is aimed at providing an inspirational energy and a motivating force for overall revival and development of North-east India in all its spheres. As a part of the programme, Mike interacted with many students and teachers of various educational institutions from the North-east, sharing his experiences and encouraging the kids to aim for the skies. As I sit down for an exciting session with Mike, I notice how he eagerly shakes hands
with the kids lining up to shake his hand, take his autograph, and pose for a picture, while Mike happily agrees with the wishes of the little angels who have thronged to see the astronaut.

“It has been a wonderful experience! Simply superb! I am really thankful to all the people of the North-east for the love and affection which they have so graciously bestowed upon me. I thank them all for praying for me, for my safety and for the safety of my crew. The people here are really kind and generous and I am touched by the warm welcome which I have been accorded by the people of the entire North-east in general and my beloved Axom in particular.” Mike, an alumnus of the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), joined the United States Air Force as a Space Systems Engineer and a Space Test Engineer at Los Angeles Air Force Base and since then, there has been no looking back for him. Selected by NASA in April 1996, Colonel Fincke reported to the Johnson Space Center where he completed two years of training and evaluation. He was assigned technical duties in the Astronaut Office Station Operations Branch serving as an International Space Station Spacecraft Communicator (ISS CAPCOM), a member of the Crew Test Support Team in Russia and as the ISS crew procedures team leader. He also served as back-up crewmember for ISS Expeditions 4 and 6 as well as back-up commander for ISS Expeditions 13 and 16. He is qualified to fly as a left-seat Flight Engineer (co-pilot) on the Russian Soyuz TM and TMA spacecraft. He was the Commander of the second NASA Extreme Environment Mission Operations (NEEMO 2) mission living and working underwater for 7 days in May of 2002.
Fincke has a total of 365 days, 21 hours and 32 minutes in space, and has logged a total of 26 hours and 12 minutes of EVA time on six spacewalks...a staggering record indeed. While he was in Space in the year 2004, he took literally hundreds of pictures of the North-east and the Brahmaputra. Mike even went to the extent of performing Bihu aboard the ISS! To show his love for Assam, the last time Mike had gone in Space in early 2009, he took with him a special Assamese silk Gamocha which was autographed by all the astronauts aboard the ISS, including Mike.

And what about Mike, the family man? “Well, I’m lucky to have Renita as my wife and God has been kind to bless us with three angels,” says the veteran astronaut with a childlike smile as he starts warming up to the conversation. The couple, who met at a NASA party in Houston, knew that they were destined to be one right from the word ‘go’! “My wife does three full time jobs -- she’s a mother, a NASA engineer and a loving wife. So you can say that she works a lot harder than I do,” says the essentially shy and demure astronaut. Mike is happily married to Renita, who, as mentioned earlier, is herself a successful engineer working in NASA.

Mike, who has been lovingly bestowed with the title of the son-in-law of Axom (Axomor Juwai), nurtures a deep love for the State, its scenic beauty and its vibrant culture. His wife Renita was instrumental in inculcating in Mike a deep love for the Assamese culture. “He is trying to learn Assamese, even though he can say a few sentences now,” says the proud lady as she tries to locate her son Chandra who is apparently all over the place. Renita Saikia has also won laurels for herself in her field of work and for her; each day at work is a wonderful experience. Renita, an engineer posted at the Johnson Space Centre, works for Wyle Laboratories, and she has been there since 1990. Having started her career as a quality engineer, she moved on to work as an integration engineer for the Medical Sciences Division at JSC. She also worked on the Crew Health Care System for many years, and then after that she has been working on the biotechnology facility, which is part of the Bioastronautics contract.

And how did she nurture the ambition of becoming an engineer in NASA? “Well, my father was an engineer, and right from high school, I was really good at math and science. It was then that I knew what I had to do in life.” Indeed, it has been a wonderful journey for her, right from that party in Houston to Mike’s space expedition and finally the tour of the North-east. Coming back to the conversation about their family life, the couple smile as they talk about their three angels -- Chandra, Tarali and Surya. And how’s the entire experience? “Well, my kids have been the source of strength for me. I have always derived great joy from my children and I feel that they are lucky
to have the blood of the Brahmaputra flowing in their veins,” says Mike. “Well, we want them to learn about, to cultivate respect for both the cultures. We want them to grow up as good human beings. Whether they want to follow in their father’s footsteps or follow their own calling is up to them. But they should grow up with the basic values of life, learn to respect human dignity and cultivate faith in the Almighty,” says an emotional Renita with a childlike smile on her face as the kids tickle each other playfully.

Renita recounts how she and Mike got married, her experiences and the wonderful moments which have been a part of her life. “It’s simply remarkable. You can’t believe the happiness and satisfaction in life I’ve received, all thanks to the Almighty and the love and blessings of our people who have blessed us from their hearts”. And how has the space experience been, both for Mike and his wife Renita? “Well, space is definitely the place you’d want to stay. But then, it’s instrumental in advancing the frontiers of human knowledge and understanding. There have been times in space when we had to encounter some critical phases. But we are trained and taught during the rigorous training programme. We are trained to handle such circumstances professionally,” notes the astronaut with a reassuring smile. And what about Renita? “For me, the whole experience of Mike being in space has been enlightening. It has taught me to renew my faith in God, and at the same time, I’ve experienced great excitement and happiness when Mike went into space. Our son, Chandra was really excited about the whole idea of his daddy going into space. But above all, it has been the experience of a lifetime.”

It has been a long day for Mike and Renita and their exhausted faces bear the brunt of the long interactions which they had to go through in the course of their homecoming. However, as I leave the two of them alone to pose with the little kids for their photographs, I cannot but fail to notice the genuine satisfaction and happiness on the face of this wonderful couple. For Renita, it has been a rejuvenating experience, coming back to see and breathe in the land in which her parents grew up, the land of the Brahmaputra. Indeed, for Renita, this has truly been a journey which will transform her, and she will carry the sights, sounds and smells of the magical land, the land of her parents, to the far West. For Mike on the other hand, it has also been a homecoming of sorts. Having experienced the rich and diverse culture of Axom, Mike’s tryst with this magical land will leave him, as he says, with wonderful memories and blessings which will help him conquer the difficulties and perils of his job with an iron will. And for Surya, Chandra and Tarali, it will be their repertoire of a wonderful collection of memories of the land of their grandparents, memories which will haunt them when they grow up, and fascinate them with the culture and picturesque beauty of Axom, the magical land, which drew their parents to its ever embracing bosom.