

A HOME IN SPACE

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ISRO has declared its intention to build a permanent space station for itself, possibly in the next five to seven years. After the mission to moon and Mars and a proposed manned space flight before 2022, this is the next logical step for the agency. What the step seems to suggest is that, in the coming years, ISRO would be undertaking many prolonged space exploration projects and sending many astronauts into space, such that it would require a permanent station for itself.

For four decades since its inception in the early 1960s, ISRO had, apart from building its capacities, focused primarily on harnessing space technologies for societal benefits. Yash Pal, the first director of Space Application Centre in Ahmedabad, once described India's space mission as "almost a sociological programme" as much as a technological programme. Vikram Sarabhai, the father of India's space programme, used to repeatedly make the point that India must be second to none in the application of advanced technologies to "the real problems of man and society". Even as late as in 2015, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) got all government departments to sit down with ISRO and identify the areas where space technology could help them achieve their objectives. In the next phase, beginning this century, ISRO established itself as a reliable and economical launcher of commercial satellites. It demonstrated its capabilities to launch all kinds of satellites, and delivered close to 300 payloads of foreign countries in space in the last 12 years. This service is likely to continue since it generates the much-needed revenue to fund ISRO's various missions.

However, ISRO is signalling that it is now ready to take a leap into space exploration. Chandrayaan-2 and Gaganyaan are, in fact, heralding ISRO into this new phase. There is a mission to the sun coming up next year, while another to Venus has also been announced. More inter-planetary explorations, and possibly a human flight to the moon, are also in the pipeline. The space station is a facility India would need in the context of missions such as these and more. NASA's International Space Station, the only one functional right now, is slated to retire by 2025, or latest by 2028, and no replacement for it has been confirmed so far. It is likely that future space stations would be commercial facilities, available to anyone for a fee. For an agency that is still to execute a successful human space flight, all this might seem a little premature. And the proposed five to seven-year timeline to achieve it, surely, is ambitious. But ISRO is known to set ambitious targets, and achieve them as well.

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