

Fifty years of Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station

When Sputnik 1 was launched by the Soviets in 1957, little did anyone in India imagine that within five decades the country would become a powerhouse in the outer space arena and a major proponent of its peaceful use.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Cold War between the U.S. and the USSR accelerated as they entered the space race, which eventually turned into a bitter rivalry and raised the risk of space weaponisation. Thankfully, this was avoided after the Outer Space Treaty of 1967.

It was against this backdrop that the Indian space programme was born in 1963 with the launch of Nike-Apache sounding rockets from Thumba in Thiruvananthapuram. The launch site was named the Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station (TERLS), or India's first space port. During the 1960s, TERLS became an international launch station and the sounding rockets launched from here proved instrumental in studying the equatorial electrojet.

The Indian space programme received support from the U.S., the USSR, France, the U.K. and West Germany. Often, this was in the form of technical equipment such as telemetry receivers, tracking systems and computers. In return, India offered to dedicate TERLS to the United Nations as a goodwill gesture. Consequently, the UN formally sponsored TERLS as an international scientific facility open to all its members.

In his book *India's Rise as a Space Power*, U.R. Rao, a pioneer of India's space programme and the ex-chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation, said, "The sounding rocket programme at TERLS was initiated through a unique international co-operative arrangement with NASA of USA, CNES of France and Hydro Meteorological Service of USSR. The presence of a strong 'equatorial electrojet' current over Thumba, which was also very close to the geomagnetic equator, made it an ideal site for the launch of sounding rockets."

To commemorate the [50th anniversary of the dedication of TERLS to the UN](#), which fell on February 2, 2018, ISRO honoured former employees of TERLS who had contributed to the sounding rocket programme.

In these five decades and more, a lot of things have changed in the Indian space programme. But India's commitment to the peaceful use of outer space has been a constant, a fact that is doubly commendable given that the entire programme advanced on the back of a considerable resource crunch. Compared to developed nations, the Indian programme still functions on a relatively small budget.

At its heart, the space programme remains focussed on civilian benefits, using space technology to improve the life of the common man. This includes the use of satellites to: map and survey crops, assess damage from natural disasters, and bring telemedicine and telecommunication to the remote areas of rural India.

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