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FIRST INDIAN IN SPACE SINCE 1984 TO LIFT OFF FOR MISSION IN MAY

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The announcement was made by Jitendra Singh, Union minister of state (independent charge) for science and technology, following a high-level meeting to review the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) upcoming missions chaired by ISRO chairman V Narayanan. The 39-year-old decorated test pilot will join the Axiom Space's Ax-4 mission in May 2025, a NASA-approved private spaceflight that will dock with the ISS for up to 14 days.

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The 39-year-old decorated test pilot will join the Axiom Space's Ax-4 mission in May 2025, a NASA-approved private spaceflight that will dock with the ISS for up to 14 days.

"India is poised to script a defining chapter in its space journey," said Singh. "Group Captain Shukla is to become the first Indian ever to visit the International Space Sta-



Shubhanshu Shukla

tion and the first Indian astronaut to travel to space in over four decades after Rakesh Sharma's iconic 1994 flight aboard a Soviet Soyuz spacecraft."

The Ax-4 mission represents a significant milestone not only for India but also for Poland and Hungary, with each nation returning to human spaceflight after more than 40 years. While this marks the second human spaceflight mission in history for all three countries, it will be their first aboard the ISS.

Shukla, shortlisted under ISRO's Human Spaceflight Programme (HSP), is among the top contenders for Gaganyaan—India's first indigenous crewed orbital flight.

During the Ax-4 mission, he is expected to gain critical experience in spaceflight operations, launch protocols, microgravity adaptation, and emergency preparedness.

According to a department of space statement, Shukla's mission reflects a strategic shift in India's approach to space exploration. "Unlike the symbolic undertones of India's first human spaceflight, this time the focus is on operational readiness and global integration. His participation underscores India's growing engagement with public-private international partnerships in space and its resolve to emerge as a serious contender in human space exploration."

Born in Lucknow, Shukla was commissioned into the IAF fighter wing in June 2006 and has accumulated 2,000 hours of flight experience as a combat leader and test pilot. He rose to the rank of group captain in March 2024 and underwent rigorous year-long training at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Star

City, Moscow. In February last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled him as one of the elite astronauts training for the Gaganyaan mission.

Aboard Ax-4, Shukla will serve as pilot alongside mission commander Peggy Whitson, a former NASA astronaut embarking on her second commercial human spaceflight. The crew also includes European Space Agency project astronaut Sławosz Uzmański, the second Polish astronaut since 1978, and Thor Kapu, the second Hungarian astronaut since 1980.

The mission will be conducted in partnership with the European Space Agency and the Hungarian to Orbit Programme, alongside ISRO. "As India's space strategy matures, Group Captain Shukla's upcoming mission stands as a symbol of a confident, forward-looking nation ready to reclaim its place in the global space race," the Department of Space stated. "His journey is more than just a flight—it's a signal that India is stepping boldly into a new era of space exploration."

50 years since the launch of Aryabhata, India's first satellite

Built by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and named after the 6th-century astronomer and mathematician, the Aryabhata (right) was launched on April 19, 1975, by a Soviet Kosmos-3M rocket, from Kapustin Yar in Russia, then part of the USSR.

A 28-sided polyhedron with all but two of its sides covered in solar cells, the unmanned earth satellite was assembled at Peenya, near Bangalore. Weighing 360 kg, it was built to conduct experiments in x-ray astronomy and solar physics, and study the upper atmosphere. It managed to collect useful information before an electrical failure saw it switched off, after four days and 60 orbits. Its mainframe worked well and it remained in space for 17 years. The Aryabhata was a landmark in India's space programme and led to, among other things, the development of the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), which has successfully launched satellites such as the Chandrayaan-1 and Mars Orbiter Mission.

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