INTELLIGENTSIA
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 3108-0766 (Online)
Volume (2), Issue (1)
January - March, 2026

Intelligentsia International Journal Of Multidisciplinary Research

The Evolution Of Space Research In India: Milestones, Challenges And The Road Ahead

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Abstract

Space research in India has evolved remarkably over the past several decades, transforming the country into one of the leading space-faring nations in the world. Beginning with modest sounding rocket experiments in the 1960s, India's space program has expanded significantly under the guidance of visionary scientists and institutions such as the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The primary objective of India's space research has been to harness space technology for national development, scientific advancement, and global cooperation. Major milestones include the launch of the Aryabhata satellite in 1975, the development of indigenous launch vehicles such as PSLV and GSLV, and successful space missions like Chandrayaan, Mangalyaan, and Aditya-L1. These achievements have demonstrated India's growing capability in satellite technology, planetary exploration, communication systems, and remote sensing. Despite these accomplishments, India's space sector faces several challenges, including technological constraints, increasing competition in the global space industry, the need for higher investment in research and development, and the complexities associated with deep space exploration. Looking ahead, India aims to strengthen its space capabilities through ambitious missions such as the Gaganyaan human spaceflight program, advanced satellite systems, and expanded international collaborations. The future of Indian space research lies in innovation, sustainable space technology, and continued scientific exploration to support national progress and global knowledge.

Key Words: Space Research, ISRO, Chandrayaan Mission, Satellite Technology, Space Exploration.

Publication Timeline
Original Manuscript Received- January 15, 2026, Peer Review Completed- January 18, 2026, Revised Manuscript Received – January 21, 2026, Accepted & Published – January 28, 2026
Recommended Citation
Hari, A. K. (2026). The Evolution Of Space Research In India: Milestones, Challenges And The Road Ahead. Intelligentsia International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2(1), 64- 71.

ISSN: 3108-0766 (Online)
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Introduction

Space research has become one of the most important fields of scientific and technological advancement in the modern world. It plays a crucial role in expanding human knowledge about the universe while also contributing significantly to national development through applications in communication, weather forecasting, navigation, disaster management, and resource monitoring. India's journey in space research began in the early 1960s with the visionary leadership of scientists such as Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, who recognized the potential of space technology in addressing the developmental needs of the country. The establishment of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in 1969 marked a major step toward building an indigenous space program focused on peaceful and developmental applications of space technology. Over the decades, India has made remarkable progress in the field of space exploration and satellite technology. One of the earliest milestones was the launch of India's first satellite, Aryabhata, in 1975. This was followed by the development of indigenous launch vehicles such as the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) and the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV), which significantly enhanced India's capability to launch satellites independently. India has also successfully carried out several ambitious space missions, including Chandrayaan-1 and Chandrayaan-3 for lunar exploration, the Mars Orbiter Mission (Mangalyaan), and the solar mission Aditya-L1. These missions have not only strengthened India's scientific capabilities but also established the country as an important participant in global space exploration. Despite these significant achievements, India's space research sector continues to face various challenges, such as technological complexities, high costs of space missions, increasing global competition, and the need for advanced research infrastructure. At the same time, the future of India's space program holds immense possibilities with upcoming projects such as the Gaganyaan human spaceflight mission and deeper planetary exploration initiatives. India's space programme gradually evolved from a science-oriented initiative in the 1960s to a commercially focused programme by the 1990s through systematic technological learning and policy development. Different phases emphasized scientific research, technological experimentation, capability building, and commercialization of space technologies (Baskaran, 2005). Therefore, examining the evolution, achievements, and challenges of India's space research is important to understand its scientific progress and future potential.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the major milestones and achievements in the evolution of space research in India.
2. To analyze the key challenges and future prospects of India's space exploration programs.

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Major Milestones and Achievements in the Evolution of Space Research in India

- **Inception of India's Space Programme: Establishment of INCOSPAR and First Sounding Rocket Launch (1962-1963)**

  Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, regarded as the father of India's space programme (Kale, 2020)., envisioned space technology for national development. In 1962, the Indian National Committee for Space Research (INCOSPAR) was formed under the Department of Atomic Energy on the recommendation of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station (TERLS) near Thiruvananthapuram was established, leveraging India's proximity to the geomagnetic equator for atmospheric studies. On November 21, 1963, India launched its first sounding rocket (Nike-Apache), marking the humble yet visionary beginning of indigenous rocket development with the Rohini series. This laid the foundational infrastructure and scientific expertise that evolved into a full-fledged national programme.

- **Birth of ISRO: Institutionalisation of Space Research (1969-1972)**

  On August 15, 1969, INCOSPAR was transformed into the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), giving structured impetus to space activities. The Space Commission and Department of Space were established in 1972, placing ISRO under direct governmental oversight (Khosla, et. al, 2025).. This institutional framework enabled coordinated development of satellites, launch vehicles, and applications in communication, remote sensing, and meteorology. Sarabhai's philosophy—"Space technology for the benefit of the common man"—guided early experiments like the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1975-1976. It shifted India from experimental sounding rockets to a comprehensive space ecosystem, fostering self-reliance and international collaborations.

- **India's Entry into the Satellite Era: Launch of Aryabhata (1975)**

  India's first satellite, Aryabhata, was launched on April 19, 1975, aboard a Soviet Kosmos-3M rocket from Kapustin Yar. Named after the ancient Indian astronomer, it carried experiments in X-ray astronomy, solar physics, and aeronomy. Weighing 360 kg, it operated for four days before power failure but demonstrated India's capability to design and build satellites. This milestone marked the country's transition from sounding rockets to orbital spacecraft, building expertise in satellite technology, tracking, and control. It paved the way for subsequent indigenous satellites and established India among nations with space assets, boosting scientific prestige and technological confidence.

- **Achieving Indigenous Launch Capability: SLV-3 Success with Rohini (1980)**

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After a failed attempt in 1979, the Satellite Launch Vehicle-3 (SLV-3) achieved its first successful flight on July 18, 1980, from Sriharikota, placing the 35-kg Rohini (RS-1) satellite into orbit. This made India the seventh nation capable of independent orbital launches. Developed indigenously under Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the four-stage solid-fuel rocket showcased mastery over propulsion, guidance, and control systems. It proved India's self-reliance in launch technology, ending dependence on foreign rockets for small satellites and setting the stage for more advanced vehicles. The success symbolised technological maturity and national pride during a period of limited resources.

- **Operational Satellites and Reliable Launch Systems: INSAT, IRS, and PSLV Maturity (1980s-1990s)**

The 1980s saw the Indian National Satellite (INSAT) system for communication and meteorology, with INSAT-1A launched in 1982 (though initial issues persisted until later series). Parallelly, the Indian Remote Sensing (IRS) satellites began with IRS-1A in 1988 for resource monitoring. The Augmented Satellite Launch Vehicle (ASLV) provided intermediate experience. The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) achieved its first successful flight in 1994, becoming ISRO's workhorse with over 95% success rate. It enabled precise polar orbits for remote-sensing satellites and commercial launches of foreign payloads. These developments created one of Asia's largest satellite constellations, revolutionising telecom, broadcasting, disaster warning, and agriculture in India.

- **Lunar Exploration Milestone: Chandrayaan-1 (2008)**

Launched on October 22, 2008, via PSLV-C11, Chandrayaan-1 was India's first lunar orbiter. It carried 11 instruments, including the Moon Impact Probe that detected water molecules on the lunar surface—a global scientific breakthrough. Operating for nearly a year, it mapped the Moon's topography and minerals. This mission established India's interplanetary credentials, validated deep-space navigation, and inspired future planetary programmes. It placed India alongside elite space-faring nations and confirmed the presence of water ice, influencing international lunar research. The success at a modest cost underscored ISRO's frugal innovation ethos.

- **Interplanetary Triumph: Mars Orbiter Mission (Mangalyaan, 2013-2014)**

Launched on November 5, 2013, aboard PSLV-C25, Mangalyaan (Mars Orbiter Mission) entered Martian orbit on September 24, 2014—the first attempt by any nation to succeed. At just $74 million, it studied Mars' atmosphere, surface, and exosphere with five payloads (Mittal, 2023).. India became the first Asian country and fourth overall to reach Mars orbit. This low-cost engineering feat demonstrated

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mastery over long-duration missions, trajectory corrections, and deep-space communication. It boosted national morale, inspired youth in STEM, and positioned ISRO as a cost-effective global partner, paving the way for future planetary probes.

- **Historic Lunar South Pole Landing: Chandrayaan-3 (2023)**

Following Chandrayaan-2's partial success in 2019 (orbiter still operational), Chandrayaan-3 achieved a flawless soft landing on August 23, 2023, near the lunar south pole—the first by any nation. The Vikram lander and Pragyan rover conducted in-situ experiments on seismic activity, thermal properties, and lunar soil. This made India the fourth country to land on the Moon and the first at the south pole, a region rich in water ice for future exploration. Declared National Space Day, it validated indigenous lander-rover technologies and reinforced India's leadership in affordable lunar science (Mane,2023).

- **Solar and Astronomical Advances: Aditya-L1 and XPoSat (2023-2024)**

Aditya-L1, India's first dedicated solar observatory, launched on September 2, 2023, and entered halo orbit around the Sun-Earth L1 point on January 6, 2024. It studies the solar corona, coronal mass ejections, and space weather with seven payloads. Concurrently, XPoSat (launched January 1, 2024) became India's first X-ray polarimetry mission for black hole and neutron star studies. These missions expanded ISRO's scientific portfolio beyond planetary exploration, enhancing space weather forecasting for satellites and aviation while demonstrating precision orbit insertion capabilities critical for future deep-space endeavours.

- **Space Docking and Global Partnerships: SpaDeX Success and NISAR Launch (2024-2025)**

The SpaDeX (Space Docking Experiment) mission, launched December 30, 2024, achieved successful rendezvous, docking, and power transfer on January 16, 2025, with repeat demonstrations in April. India became the fourth country (after US, Russia, China) to master this technology essential for space stations and human missions. Complementing this, the joint ISRO-NASA NISAR satellite launched on July 30, 2025, via GSLV for high-resolution Earth observation. These milestones advanced India's human spaceflight roadmap (Gaganyaan targeted for 2026-2027) and self-reliance, opening doors for Bharatiya Antariksh Station by 2035 and cementing India as a major space power.

- **Challenges in the Evolution of India's Space Research Programme**

India’s space journey, while inspiring, has been defined by formidable challenges that demanded extraordinary resilience and innovation. From inception, severe financial constraints shaped the programme. ISRO has consistently operated on a fraction of the budgets available to NASA or CNSA—around ₹13,000–14,000 crore annually in recent years—necessitating the famous "frugal innovation" model. This resource scarcity slowed infrastructure development and limited launch frequency, even as ambitions grew.

International sanctions posed the most crippling early hurdles. After the 1974 and 1998 nuclear tests, technology denial regimes, particularly the Missile Technology Control Regime, blocked access to critical components. The decade-long struggle to develop indigenous cryogenic engines for the GSLV following the aborted Russian technology transfer remains a textbook case of how external barriers forced costly self-reliance. Technical setbacks have repeatedly tested ISRO's mettle. The first SLV-3 failure in 1979, the Chandrayaan-2 lander mishap in 2019, and a string of recent PSLV anomalies—including third-stage failures in May 2025 and January 2026—highlighted vulnerabilities in quality control and supply chains under mounting pressure. These incidents not only caused satellite losses but also delayed strategic and commercial missions.

Today, the core challenge has shifted to scaling up. ISRO is simultaneously executing Gaganyaan (with uncrewed tests targeted in 2026), Chandrayaan-4, Next-Generation Launch Vehicle development, and the Bharatiya Antariksh Station by 2035, while maintaining satellite constellations. Limited testing infrastructure, low launch cadence, and heavy dependence of private players on ISRO facilities have created bottlenecks. Governance issues in the liberalised sector—regulatory clarity, FDI norms, and the absence of a comprehensive Space Activities Bill—add further complexity. Yet these very challenges have forged India's unique strength in cost-effective, high-impact space exploration. Sustained higher funding, deeper industry integration, and institutional reforms will be essential to convert hurdles into stepping stones for future leadership.

The Task Ahead: Charting India's Ambitious Space Future

With Gaganyaan's first uncrewed test flight (G1) slated for March 2026 and the crewed mission targeted for 2027, India stands at the threshold of becoming the fourth nation to achieve independent human spaceflight. Three uncrewed orbital demonstrations will validate the human-rated LVM3, life-support systems, crew module re-entry, and Vyommitra humanoid robot before sending Gaganyatris into low-Earth orbit. This milestone alone will redefine national capability and inspire generations. Beyond human spaceflight, the roadmap is audacious. Chandrayaan-4, a dual-launch sample-return mission using LVM3 and PSLV, is progressing toward a 2027–28 launch, aiming to bring lunar south-pole rocks and soil for laboratory analysis—the first such capability outside the US, Russia, and China. Chandrayaan-5 will follow with a heavier lander and extended mission life. Parallelly, the Next-

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Generation Launch Vehicle (NGLV) is under accelerated development to deliver 30-tonne payloads to LEO at lower costs, forming the backbone for the Bharatiya Antariksh Station. The Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS) envisions its first module by 2028 and full operational capability by 2035, enabling long-duration microgravity research, Earth observation, and technology testing. A Venus orbiter (Shukrayaan) around 2028 and a second Mars mission will expand interplanetary reach, while plans for an Indian astronaut on the Moon by 2040 signal deeper lunar ambitions.

Achieving this requires scaling from mission excellence to industrial capacity: raising annual launch cadence to 50 in five years, fully integrating private industry (including the first industry-built PSLV), enacting the long-pending Space Activities Bill, and expanding testing infrastructure. With sustained political support, higher funding, and ecosystem reforms, these "tasks ahead" will not only fulfil national aspirations but establish India as a cost-effective, innovation-driven global space power by 2035. The journey from Thumba's modest rocket range to a sovereign orbital station and lunar outpost is now a national imperative.

Conclusion

India's space journey, spanning over six decades, stands as one of the most remarkable stories of scientific vision, national resilience, and frugal innovation in modern history. What began in 1962 with Dr. Vikram Sarabhai's modest sounding-rocket experiments at Thumba has evolved into a sophisticated, self-reliant programme that has placed India among the world's elite space powers. From the pioneering Aryabhata satellite and SLV-3 success to the historic Chandrayaan-3 lunar landing and Mangalyaan's first-attempt Mars triumph, ISRO has repeatedly demonstrated that high-impact space exploration need not come with exorbitant price tags. The path was never easy. Chronic underfunding, crippling international sanctions after nuclear tests, repeated technical failures, and the monumental challenge of building cryogenic engines from scratch tested the organisation's resolve. Yet these very obstacles forged ISRO's signature strength: doing more with less. The same ethos that powered low-cost interplanetary missions now drives the ambitious roadmap ahead—Gaganyaan human spaceflight by 2027, Chandrayaan sample-return, the Bharatiya Antariksh Station by 2035, and a permanent Indian presence on the Moon by 2040. Today, as private industry integrates rapidly and regulatory frameworks mature, India is transitioning from a follower to a leader in affordable, accessible space technology. The programme has already transformed lives through satellite-based communication, disaster management, agriculture, and education. Looking forward, it promises to inspire millions of young Indians and offer the world a sustainable model of space development. India's ascent to the stars is far more than a technological achievement; it is a testament to the power of imagination guided by purpose. With continued political will, increased investment, and deeper industry-academia collaboration, the coming decade will see India not just reaching space—

ISSN: 3108-0766 (Online)
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but shaping its future for the benefit of all humankind. The stars, once distant dreams, now beckon as the next frontier of a confident, capable nation.

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