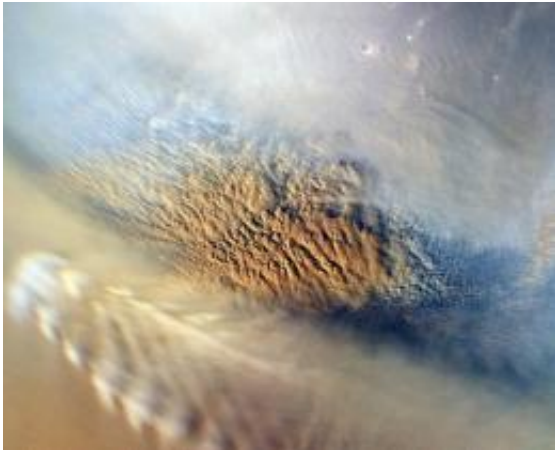


India to launch Mars mission: PM (Update)

August 15 2012



This NASA close-up image of a dust storm on the surface of Mars. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has confirmed that New Delhi plans launch a space probe that will orbit Mars, after press reports that the mission was scheduled to begin late 2013.

India plans to launch a space probe that will orbit Mars, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh confirmed on Wednesday after press reports that the mission was scheduled to begin late next year.

The project would mark another step in the country's ambitious space programme, which placed a probe on the moon three years ago and envisages its first manned mission in 2016.

"Our spaceship will go near Mars and collect important scientific information," Singh said in his annual Independence Day address,

heralding the plan as "a huge step for us in the area of science and technology".

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is expected to launch the unmanned orbiter as early as November next year, the Press Trust of India news agency reported earlier this month.

According to one ISRO official, the cost of the mission has been estimated at four to five billion rupees (\$70-90 million).

India has a well-established space programme which is a source of strong national pride, but it has also attracted criticism as the government struggles to tackle dire poverty and child malnutrition.

Power blackouts on two consecutive days this month knocked out electricity across vast swathes of the country and underlined weaknesses in India's basic infrastructure.

"More attention needs to be paid to the poor on issues such as health, drinking water and literacy," Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of the Sulabh sanitation charity and one of India's most noted welfare activists, told AFP.

"Going to space might have some scientific benefits but it alone will not help the condition of India's poor."

In September 2009, India's Chandrayaan-1 lunar probe discovered water on the moon, boosting the country's credibility among more experienced space-faring nations.

But the space programme suffered a setback in December 2010 when a satellite launch vehicle blew up and fell into the Bay of Bengal after veering from its intended flight path.

The United States, Russia, Europe, Japan and China have all sent missions to Mars.

The US robot Curiosity is currently on the surface of the "Red Planet" after landing last week to hunt for soil-based signs of life and send back data for a future human mission.

Curiosity is a nuclear-powered vehicle that is designed for a two-year mission, though scientists hope it will last at least twice that long.

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