

India clears mission to Mars

August 4 2012



Indian scientists watch displays as they sit in the Satellite Control Centre of the Indian Space Research Organisation's Master Control Facility in 2011. India's government has cleared plans to put an orbital probe around Mars next year to study the red planet's climate and geology.

India's government has cleared plans to put an orbital probe around Mars next year to study the red planet's climate and geology, a report said Saturday.

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

A cabinet meeting late Friday approved the mission as India aims to cement its reputation as a serious player in the space industry, the Press Trust of India quoted an unnamed official in the premier's office as saying.

The [Indian Space Research Organisation](#) (ISRO) is expected to launch the [Mars Orbiter](#) as early as November next year, the semi-official news agency said.

The unmanned Mars mission, which will study the red planet's atmosphere, will be launched by an ISRO rocket.

The cost of the mission, approved by the cabinet meeting headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, is estimated to be 4.0-5.0 billion rupees (\$70-90 million), according to an ISRO official.

The reported approval of the Indian mission comes as the United States expects to land on Monday its most advanced [robotic rover](#) to hunt for clues about past life and water on Earth's nearest planetary neighbour.

India will be the sixth country to launch a mission to Mars after the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan and China.

In September 2009, India's Chandrayaan-1 [lunar probe](#) discovered water on the moon, boosting the country's credibility among established 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.

Plans for the Mars mission come as India's government has been under pressure to concentrate on other issues such as massive power shortages and improving the nation's creaking roads, ports and other infrastructure.

Earlier in the week, monster blackouts on two consecutive days knocked out electrical power for vast swathes of the country.

India, which kicked off its space programme in 1963 and has developed its own satellites and launch vehicles to reduce dependence on overseas agencies, plans to launch its maiden manned space flight later in the decade.

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Citation: India clears mission to Mars (2012, August 4) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-india-mission-mars.html>

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