



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS In Focus: 16/2025

11 July 2025

Mission Axiom-4: A Long Wait Ends

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Source: <https://www.axiomspace.com/mission-blog/ax4-launches>



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Keywords: Axiom-4, Shubhanshu Shukla, Mission Gaganyaan, Covid-19

The Mission Axiom-4's long-awaited journey to the International Space Station (ISS) began on June 25, 2025, at 2:31 am (Eastern Time). The mission lifted off using the SpaceX Falcon-9 rocket and the Dragon Spacecraft. The precise venue for the launch was Launch Complex 39A at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Kennedy Space Center, situated in Florida. ¹

From India's perspective, this mission launch was extremely crucial as it marked the first time in 41 years that an Indian had the opportunity to travel to outer space. Although astronauts like Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams had been to outer space, it is worth noting that they were not representing India in their respective missions. So, in that sense, India's Shubhanshu Shukla has become the second Indian after Rakesh Sharma to go on a crewed mission to outer space and the first to reach the ISS. During Rakesh Sharma's voyage to outer space, the ISS hadn't come into existence, as it only became operational in 1998.

For India, this mission is seen as a prequel to the much-awaited Mission *Gaganyaan*- India's first human spaceflight mission to outer space. This mission was announced by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, on India's 72nd Independence Day in 2018 from the Red Fort in his address to the nation. Then, the launch date for the mission was set for August 15, 2022. The reason for choosing this specific date was that on this day, India would complete 75 years as an independent nation-state. The policymakers must have thought that if Mission *Gaganyaan* were to be launched on that day, it would enhance the feelings of patriotism among citizens and give them a new reason to cheer and smile.

As they say, life has different plans than one's own. Unfortunately, this plan was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought systemic disruption on a global scale, affecting global supply chains, thereby leaving its impact across various industries. In such difficult circumstances, it was but natural that the Mission *Gaganyaan* would get delayed. Multiple waves of COVID-19 from the start of 2020 until 2022, along with new variants of the virus, continued to push back the timelines for the Mission *Gaganyaan*. In hindsight, this might have been a blessing in disguise, as there is now no set launch date for this mission, unlike earlier. Although 2027 is earmarked for the launch, the timeline is subject to change depending on prevailing circumstances.

India's participation in Mission Axiom-4 was a result of a collaboration between India and the United States. The mission was envisaged during the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the United States in 2023. During his meeting with Joe Biden, the then-President of the United States, it was agreed upon to send an Indian astronaut to the ISS as part of a broader Indo-US bilateral partnership. Last month, an Indian delegation led by the Indian Space and Research Organisation

(ISRO), chairman visited the United States, traveling to the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, the Kennedy Space Center (KSC) at Merritt Island, Florida, and various facilities of SpaceX, Axiom Space, and Blue Origin.

As per ISRO, "*The larger purpose of this visit was to meet with the senior leadership of multiple agencies to oversee the progress and preparation, and to facilitate and enable India's participation in the Axiom-04 mission, as well as explore new cooperation opportunities in the space sector*". The timing of this high-profile delegation's visit coincided with the launch of Mission Axiom-4, which had been delayed multiple times over a four-week period, starting from May 29, when the launch was initially scheduled.

India's two astronauts, Shubhanshu Shukla and Prashanth B. Nair, selected for this mission, underwent extensive training exercises at multiple simulator facilities. These training modules prepared them to be ready for each and every aspect of this mission. Although this is just a two-week mission for Shubhanshu Shukla, the sheer experience gained from this will hopefully help India in its preparations for Mission *Gaganyaan*. Outer space requires intensive physical training and considerable physical and mental effort. This mission will be a massive learning experience in that pursuit. No number of simulation exercises on the ground can match a live experience in outer space.

India has never been a participant in the space race, nor does it intend to participate in it now. However, space exploration has been a part of India's space policy since the Cold War era. The Axiom-4 mission is precisely a pursuit of that step. When Shubhanshu Shukla returns home, it will be a good time to assess and reflect on the lessons learnt from this mission.

NOTES:

¹ Mark A. Garcia, "Axiom's Fourth Private Mission Launches to Station Aboard Dragon," NASA, June 25, 2025, <https://www.nasa.gov/blogs/spacestation/2025/06/25/axioms-fourth-private-mission-launches-to-station-aboard-dragon/>. Accessed on June 30, 2025.