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[ALSO PART OF GAGANYAAN MISSION]

India picks 'Prime Astronaut' for mission to space station

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NEW DELHI: Group captain Shubhanshu Shukla has been selected as primary 'gaganyatri' (astronaut) for an upcoming India-United States mission to the International Space Station, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) announced on Friday, adding group captain Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair will be his backup.

India and US had signed an agreement for a joint ISRO-National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) effort to the International Space Station during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in June last year.

"Towards the goal of mounting a joint ISRO-NASA effort, the Human Space Flight Centre (HSFC) of ISRO has entered into a Space Flight Agreement (SFA) with NASA-identified service provider Axiom Space International for its Axiom-4 mission to the ISS," ISRO said in a statement.

A National Mission Assignment Board has as recommended two gaganyatris as prime and backup Mission Pilot for this mission — Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla (prime) and Group Captain Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair (backup), it said. "The assigned crewmembers will be finally



Grp Capt Shubhanshu Shukla

approved to fly to the International Space Station by the Multilateral Crew Operations Panel (MCOF). The recommended Gaganyatris will commence their training for the mission from 1st week of August 2024," the statement said.

During the mission, ISRO said, the gaganyatris will conduct selected scientific research and technology demonstration experiments on board the ISS, as well as participate in space outreach activities. "The experiences gained during this mission will be beneficial for the Indian Human Space Programme and it will also strengthen human space flight cooperation between ISRO and NASA," it added.

While no official date has been announced for the joint mission, reports indicated the launch could be sometime later this year.

Shukla and Nair are among the four Indian Air Force (IAF) fighter

pilots, whose names were announced by Modi in February for India's maiden human space-flight mission "Gaganyaan" scheduled for next year. The other two pilots are group captains Ajit Krishnan and Angad Pratap.

Born in Lucknow on October 10, 1985, Shukla (38) is the youngest of the four IAF pilots selected for Gaganyaan, officials said, adding he is an accomplished fighter pilot who has flown a variety of aircraft.

A closely guarded secret for over four years, Modi on February 27 revealed the names of the four fighter pilots for Gaganyaan. The four astronauts are hand-picked IAF test pilots who have undergone training in Russia.

Shukla, an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, was commissioned in the fighter stream of IAF on June 17, 2006. He is a fighter combat leader and a test pilot with around 2,000 hours of flying experience. He has flown several aircraft, including Su-30 MKI, MiG-21, MiG-29, Jaguar, and Hawk.

The four astronauts, who were awarded the Antriksh Yatri Pankh in February at the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, are from the elite Air Force Test Pilot School, which comes under the Bengaluru-based Aircraft and Systems Testing Establishment (ASTE).