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Indian Astronaut Candidates Start Training in Russia

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The Indian pilots are expected to go into orbit on board the three-person Gaganyaan spacecraft sometime in late 2021 or mid-2022. **Alexander Shcherbak / TASS**

Four aspiring astronauts from India have embarked on a 12-month training program in Russia, Russia's space launch service provider announced Monday.

They are expected to go into orbit on board the three-person Gaganyaan spacecraft sometime in late 2021 or mid-2022. The mission — which is set to be India's first manned space flight — was estimated to cost $1.4 billion in 2018, when the four pilots were picked out from the Indian air force.

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The four Indian pilots will undergo "comprehensive and biomedical training" at Russia's main space training center in Zvyozdny Gorodok ("Star City") outside Moscow, said Glavkosmos, a subsidiary of Russia's Federal Space Agency.

“[T]hey will study in detail the systems of the Soyuz manned spaceship, [and be] trained in short-term weightlessness aboard the special Il-76MDK aircraft,” Glavkosmos said.

The Il-76MDK is a zero-gravity airlifter for trainee astronauts and space tourists.

“The Indian pilots will also be trained to act correctly in case of abnormal landing of the manned spaceship descent module in various climate and geographic zones,” it added.

At least one of the four pilots will stay behind on Earth when the Gaganyaan launches.

Gaganyaan and other space missions come as India looks to become a low-cost space power. The country’s unmanned Mars mission in 2014 cost $74 million, less than the budget of Hollywood space blockbuster “Gravity.”

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