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Article For Reading – **Steady** but slow: On the VIPER mission, lessons for India

India's space programme needs more resources to realise its full potential

In July, NASA cancelled its Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover (VIPER) mission to the moon after the development was **beset** by delays and costs had ballooned. By this time its engineers had fully assembled it and completed some tests, but NASA **held its ground**. The sudden decision **dismayed** scientists. VIPER was designed to map the distribution of water-ice in the moon's south pole region and the soils in which it occurred, over three months. In all, the golf-cart-sized rover was to be launched by a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket and deployed using Astrobotic's 'Griffin' lander, all managed through NASA's Commercial Lunar Payload Services programme. Landing on the moon is an expensive, time-consuming exercise. NASA's decision to cancel VIPER at this late stage thus drew the attention of the U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology and of the wider international community, which sees in VIPER's absence an opportunity for China's increasingly complex lunar programme to **lead the way**. The world's rush back to the moon offers potentially significant commercial and geopolitical gains.

VIPER was expected to be a **pivotal** component of the US-led 'lunar axis' defined by the Artemis Accords, which counts India among its leaders. Yet, India missed a trick when, on September 18, the Union Cabinet approved a proposal by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to begin the second phase of the country's lunar programme with Chandrayaan-4, a sample-return mission.

Moments after the Chandrayaan-3 lander descended on the moon's surface on August 23, 2023, reports erupted to claim India had yet again admitted itself into a small, elite group of countries that have achieved an autonomous lunar soft-landing. But such proclamations overlook the considerable gaps between these countries' space agencies from an operations perspective. One **pertinent** difference is that ISRO is unable to execute multiple flagship missions in parallel. Instead, it follows a 'one major mission at a time' **cadence** that, in exchange for maximising resource use efficiency, leaves the organisation incapable of **manoeuvring** rapidly to respond to new opportunities. Had it been able, ISRO could have sought the Cabinet's approval for the 'Lunar Polar Explorer' mission it is planning with its Japanese counterpart, to land a rover on the moon to perform many of the crucial tasks VIPER was expected to, especially **prospecting** for large water-ice deposits.

Even now, the VIPER incident should remind the Centre that despite an expanding allocation and new funding modes **in the offing**, the Indian space programme needs more resources to realise its full potential.

Summary –

In July, NASA cancelled its VIPER mission to the moon due to delays and rising costs, despite the rover being fully assembled and tested. VIPER was intended to map water-ice distribution at the moon's south pole and was part of NASA's Commercial Lunar Payload Services program. This cancellation has drawn concern from the U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology and has raised questions about China's advancing lunar program. Meanwhile, India's ISRO approved the Chandrayaan-4 sample-return mission, following its successful Chandrayaan-3 soft landing. However, ISRO's approach of pursuing one major mission at a time limits its responsiveness to new opportunities, such as collaborating on a lunar rover mission with Japan that could have addressed gaps left by VIPER's cancellation. This situation highlights the need for India to increase resources in its space program to fully capitalize on its potential.

Vocabulary –

1. Beset (Verb) परेशान करना –

Meaning- An action where something or someone to trouble or threaten persistently.

Synonyms – Harass, Plague, Beleaguer.

Antonyms – Support, Protect, Defend.

E.g.- The small village was beset by frequent floods, leaving the resident in constant fear.

2. Steady (Adj, Adv) लगातार, नियमित –

Meaning – In a regular, consistent or reliable manner.

Synonyms – Constant, Firm, Substained.

Antonyms – Inconsistent, Wobbly, Erratic.

E.g.- They maintained a steady pace during the marathon.

3. Pivotal (Adj) महत्वपूर्ण –

Meaning – Something that is of crucial or central importance in a situation or process.

Synonyms – Crucial, Vital, Significant.

Antonyms – Minor, Insignificant, Trivial.

E.g.- Her research provided pivotal evidence that influenced the committee's decision.

4. **Pertinent (Adj) प्रासंगिक, संबंधित-**

Meaning – something that is relevant or applicable to a particular matter or situation.

Synonyms – Applicable, Suitable, Appropriate.

Antonyms – Irrelevant, Impertinent, Extraneous.

E.g.- The lawyer presented pertinent evidence that help seay the jury's decision.

5. **Cadence (Noun) लय-**

Meaning – In a rhythmic flow or sequence.

Synonyms – Rhythm, Irregularity, Dissonance.

Antonyms – Discord, Irregularity, Dissonance.

E.g.- har speech had a soothing Cadence that made it easy to listen to.

6. **Manoeuvre (Noun, Verb) तिकड़म, कुशलता-**

Meaning – An action that is planned or executed with skills.

Synonyms – Strategy, Navigation, Handling.

Antonyms – Stagnation, Ineptness, Clumsiness.

E.g.- The driver executed a clever manoeuvre to avoid the obstacle.

7. **Dismay (Noun, Verb) निराशा-**

Meaning –(Verb) The act of causing someone to feel shock or disappointment.

Synonyms- Anxiety, Distress, Apprehension.

Antonyms – Joy, Calm, Delight, Cotentnment.

E.g.- The news this dismayed him.

8. Prospect (Noun, Verb) संभावना, पूर्वेक्षण

Meaning – (Noun) The possibility or likely food of some future event occurring.

(Verb) – The search for mineral deposits, by drilling or excavation.

Synonyms – Expectation, Chance, Hope.

Antonyms – Improvability, Unlikelihood, Doubt.

E.g.- The prospect of a promotion excited her as she work hard to meet her goals.

Idiomatic Expressions-

1. Hold your ground – अड़े रहना-

Meaning – To support a particular agreement or to have a particular opinion when other people are opposing you or trying to make you change your mind.

2. Lead the way – मार्गदर्शन करना-

Meaning – To guide or show others how to proceed or to take initiative in a situation.

3. In the offing – नजदीक, आगामी-

Meaning – Something is likely to happen soon or is in on the horizon.

E.g.- A promotion is in the offing.