

Gopi Thotakura 1st Indian 'Space Tourist

Why In News

- In an unprecedented leap towards the stars, **pilot Gopichand Thotakura** is set to become the first Indian to venture into space as a tourist. Selected as part of the elite crew for **Blue Origin's New Shepard-25 (NS-25)** mission, Mr Thotakura will make a journey beyond the Earth's atmosphere along with five other candidates.



What It Is All About

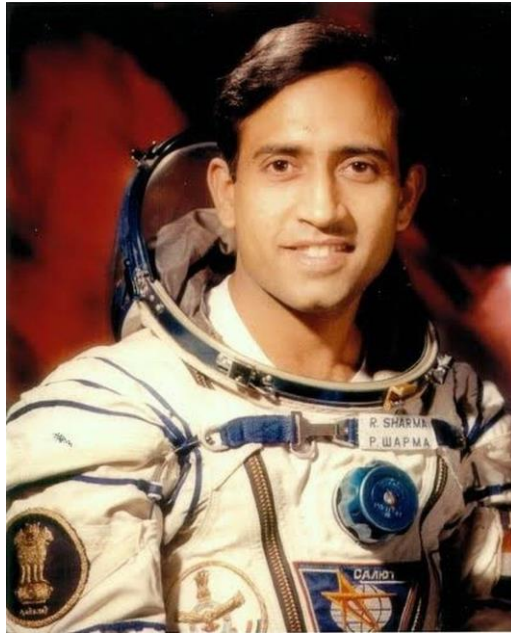
- **Blue Origin, the space startup** spearheaded by Jeff Bezos, recently unveiled the six-person crew set to embark on its **NS-25 mission**.
- Among them is Ed Dwight, a significant figure in space history. In 1961, he became the **first Black astronaut candidate** when President John F Kennedy handpicked him for training at the Aerospace Research Pilot School (ARPS).



- Despite this milestone, Dwight never had the opportunity to journey into space. Joining him on the **NS-25 mission** is **Gopichand Thotakura**, potentially making history as the first Indian space tourist.



- While Thotakura follows in the footsteps of earlier Indian aspirants like veteran travel documentary producer **Santhosh George Kulangara**, who secured a seat on a Virgin Galactic space plane, he stands on the brink of achieving what none before him have accomplished.
- Although Thotakura and Kulangara may not claim the title of India's first spacefarers—Rakesh Sharma earned that distinction in 1984 aboard the Soviet Soyuz T-11 rocket—Thotakura's journey is nonetheless groundbreaking.



Who Is Gopichand Thotakura

- Described by **Blue Origin** as an **entrepreneur** and aviator who took to the skies before he could drive, Thotakura co-founded Preserve Life Corp, a holistic wellness centre based in Georgia, USA.



- "In addition to flying jets commercially, Gopi pilots bush, aerobatic, and seaplanes, as well as gliders and hot air balloons, and has served as an international medical jet pilot. A lifelong traveler, his most recent adventure took him to the summit of **Mt. Kilimanjaro**," said a press release from the Bezos-led space company.
- Thotakura's journey began at Sarala Birla Academy in Bengaluru, followed by a Bachelor's degree in Aeronautical Sciences from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida.

What Lies Ahead

- The **Blue Origin NS-25 mission** marks the first crewed flight of the fully reusable New Shepard rocket since NS-22 in 2022. Following a temporary hiatus due to an engine failure during an uncrewed mission in September 2022, the fleet resumed operations in December 2023.



- Accompanying Thotakura and fellow astronaut Ed Dwight will be **Mason Angel, Sylvain Chiron**, Kenneth L Hess, and Carol Schaller. This will be Blue Origin's seventh crewed suborbital space flight, offering passengers a glimpse of outer space before re-entering Earth's atmosphere.

What Exactly Is New Shepard

- **Named after Alan Shepard**, America's pioneering astronaut, the New Shepard launch system is a reusable suborbital rocket powered by Blue Engine 3 (BE3). Notably, the booster can throttle down to just eight kilometres per hour for a controlled landing.



- The **six astronauts aboard** will experience the thrill of space travel from the pressurised crew capsule, each enjoying their own window seat. With the vehicle fully autonomous, there will be no pilot on this mission.