

# End Of An Era

*Space exploration is winding down,  
awaits a new giant leap*

It was once thought that landing a man on the moon was only a milestone as mankind journeyed ever outward into space. But 42 years after the event it looks more like a climax, as the nation that sent men to the moon retires its last space-faring vehicles. After Atlantis, Nasa's last space shuttle, landed at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida last week, the end of the space shuttle programme will mean pink slips for an estimated 9,500 workers. And it's feared that many space-faring skills will be lost forever.

On hindsight it's evident that the fate of space programmes has a lot to do with geopolitical realities here on earth. Cold War competition and issues of national pride led the Americans to authorise the enormous spending that was necessary to land men on the moon by 1969. The end of the Cold War led to international cooperation in space, evident in the International Space Station (ISS) spearheaded by the Americans and the Russians. And the current season of lay-offs, economic slowdown and American indebtedness has led President Obama to cut back sharply on Nasa's space programmes. The ISS itself is slated to be de-orbited by 2020.



Does that mean the era of exploration – fired by the quest for conquering the unknown and going where no man has ever gone before – is over? Not necessarily, as private entrepreneurs are taking up the mantle. Richard Branson and Elon Musk are leading the charge for private investment in space travel, while Google has offered \$30 million to the first private venture that can land on the moon. Meanwhile, the same considerations of national and ideological prestige that

had once spurred on the US and USSR motivate China now, as it has ambitious plans for manned missions to the moon and beyond. And where China steps forth, India could follow.

Nevertheless it's hard to doubt that cost considerations remain prohibitive for manned missions. It would be a bit of a wet blanket if the Chinese achieve at enormous cost what the Americans already had half a century earlier. And it's a conundrum for India, given its paucity of resources, whether it should expend treasure on a manned moon mission or continue with the successful Chandrayaan-1 type unmanned probes. Perhaps we await a technological leap, which will not only make space travel easier but also bridge the distance to other star systems with earth-like habitable planets. That would certainly fire the human imagination, in a way that unmanned probes to dead planets within the solar system can't.