

Curiosity sets down on Mars, beams first image

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA: National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the United States opened a new chapter in the history of interplanetary exploration on Monday when its \$2.5 billion nuclear-powered robot, Curiosity, beamed back pictures from the surface of Mars.

The one-tonne mobile lab is the largest rover ever sent to Mars, and its high-speed landing was the most daring to date, using a rocket-powered sky crane to lower the six-wheeled vehicle gently to the red planet's surface.

"Touchdown confirmed," said a member of mission control at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory as scientists hugged each other and the room erupted in cheers late Sunday. "We are wheels down on Mars. Oh, my God."

A dusty image of Curiosity's wheel, taken from a camera on the vehicle, confirmed the arrival of the car-sized rover and its sophisticated toolkit designed to hunt for signs that life once existed there.

A second image arrived within seconds, showing the shadow of the rover on the Martian surface. The official landing time was 10:32 p.m. Sunday on the U.S. West Coast (0532 GMT Monday), according to a NASA statement.

The rover is set for a two-year mission to explore the planet, including a long climb up a mountain to analyse sediment layers that are up to a billion year-old.

When the landing was announced after a tense, seven-minute entry, descent and

landing, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory filled with jubilation as the mission team cheered and exchanged Mars chocolate bars.

President Barack Obama described the landing as "an unprecedented feat of technology that will stand as a point of national pride far into the future."

And Charles Bolden, NASA administrator, applauded all other nations - such as France and Australia - whose scientists contributed to experiments on board the rover.

In the final moments, the craft accelerated with the pull of gravity as it neared Mars' atmosphere, made a fiery entry at 13,200 miles (21,240 km) per hour and then slowed with the help of a supersonic parachute.

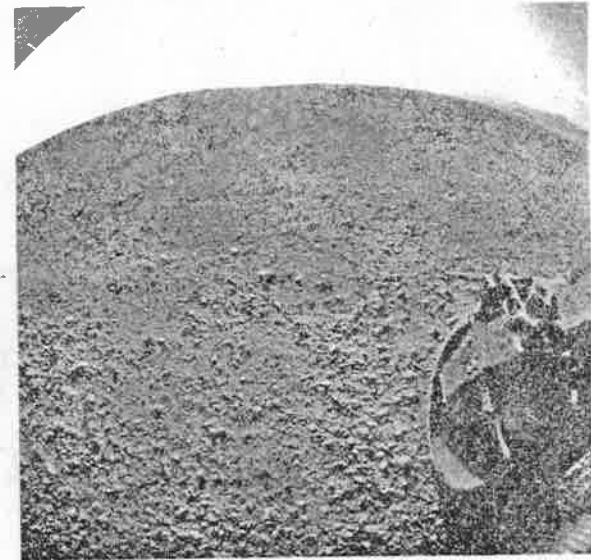
After that, an elaborate sky

crane, powered by rocket blasters, kicked in, and the rover was lowered down by nylon tethers, apparently landing upright on all six wheels.

The spacecraft had been collecting data on radiation during its eight-and-half month journey following launch in November 2011 from Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Previous attempts by space agencies since 1960 have seen a near 40 per cent success rate in sending landers, orbiters or other spacecraft to Mars. — AFP

**Indian scientist's role;
Mind-boggling, says
Kasturirangan: Page 12
Editorial: In pursuit of life**



This is one of the first images taken by Curiosity after it landed on Mars. — PHOTO: AP