

1. Truth Social**Why Today?**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined the social media platform Truth Social on March 17.

**What is it?**

Truth Social is a social media platform owned by Trump Media & Technology Group. US President Donald Trump is the biggest shareholder in this company (though he later put his shares in a trust controlled by his oldest son, Donald Trump Jr).

Truth Social was launched in 2022, after Trump was banned from sites like Twitter

(now X) and Facebook following the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol by his supporters (his accounts were later reinstated).

In terms of user interface, it is similar to X, where users can post 'truths' that can be reshared and replied to.

How is Truth Social different from other social media platforms?

Truth Social positions itself as a 'Big Tent' platform where all sorts of views can be expressed with minimal censorship from the platform, but is dominated by conservative voices. Also, it is the only social media platform whose owner holds a tremendously powerful political position.

His position as President of the United States and owner of the social media site has also raised concerns of conflict of interest — the more attention-grabbing his posts are, the more money the platform makes. Also, everyone who buys shares in the platform is adding to the US President's personal wealth.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

2. What is Sikhs for Justice, the group India wants designated as Foreign Terrorist Organisation in the US**Why in News?**

The Indian government has asked the United States to designate the pro-Khalistan outfit Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO).

What is Sikhs for Justice?



SFJ was founded in 2007 by Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a US-based attorney believed to be in his early 50s. According to its website, SFJ seeks to achieve “self-determination for the Sikh people in their historic homeland” in “Indian held Punjab”, and “establish a sovereign state, popularly known as Khalistan”.

Gurpatwant Singh Pannun

Born in the 1960s in the village of Khankot, on the outskirts of Amritsar, Pannun grew up in Punjab during the heyday of the Khalistan movement and militancy in the state. He graduated in law from Panjab University sometime in the 1990s, and then moved to the US.

He has been active in the movement for Khalistan in the Sikh diaspora in the US and Canada since the early 2000s.

What is the significance of a possible FTO designation?

India refers to Pannun as a terrorist, and has banned SFJ under the UAPA. There are dozens of cases against Pannun and his organisation in India, including three sedition cases in Punjab. But given Pannun is a foreign citizen on foreign soil, New Delhi has been unable to impede SFJ's activities. This is why the FTO designation by the US could be significant.

Put simply, such a designation would cripple Pannun's US-based organisation. It is not only unlawful for a person in the US to provide “material support or resources” to a designated FTO, American financial institutions may be required to block all transactions involving assets held or controlled by an FTO.

There are some 77 listed FTOs at the moment, including the likes of Al Qaeda, ISIS (and its multiple offshoots), Hamas, Indian Mujahideen, and Jamat ud Dawa.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: The Hindu

3. Why Sunita Williams's unscheduled nine months long space stay may be a blessing in disguise for researchers

Why Now?

American astronauts Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore have returned to Earth after the longest-ever unscheduled stay in space. The astronauts had travelled to the International Space Station (ISS) in June last year and were supposed to return in a week. However, the space vehicle that had taken them there, a Boeing spacecraft called Starliner, developed problems after which it was considered unsafe for the astronauts' return.

While Starliner itself returned safely to Earth in September 2024, the two astronauts were stranded on the ISS, waiting for an alternative travel arrangement. Now, a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft, which carried four astronauts to the ISS on a routine assignment, is bringing back Williams and Wilmore on its return journey. Two other astronauts, Nick Hague and Aleksandr

Gorbunov, who have completed their time on the ISS, are also returning with Williams and Wilmore.

Nine months in space



Williams and Wilmore will come back after more than nine months — 286 days — in space. Their stay is not the longest — several astronauts, both from the US and Russia, have remained in space for longer. Soviet cosmonaut Valeri Polyakov holds the record — he spent 438 days at the Mir space station between January 1994 and March 1995. Mir predated the ISS, and had been operational for 15 years between 1986 and 2001 before it was brought down.

Between September 2022 and September 2023, US astronaut Frank Rubio completed 371 days at the ISS.

Others have spent even more time in space cumulatively over multiple missions. Russia's Oleg Kononenko has made five trips to space, spending a total of 1,111 days. On his last journey, which was completed last year, he returned to Earth after 374 days.

Peggy Whitson of the US has gone three times, and spent 675 days in all, the longest stay in space for a woman astronaut.

This is the third time for both Williams and Wilmore as well. Williams, 59, spent 196 days on her first visit in 2006-2007, and then another 127 days in 2012. Wilmore, 62, spent a total of 178 days at the ISS during his two previous visits in 2014 and 2015.

Boeing's test mission

Williams and Wilmore were on a very short visit to the ISS this time. The main aim of their travel was to validate the capability of Boeing Starliner in taking crewed missions to the ISS. The Starliner CST-100 is a new spacecraft developed specifically for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) Commercial Crew Program, which seeks to enable private aerospace companies to transport astronauts to and from the ISS. With space travel expected to expand greatly in the coming years, this program is intended to free up NASA to focus on building spacecraft and rockets for deep space missions.

SpaceX was the first company to be certified to carry astronauts to the ISS under this program. Boeing came next. The flight that took Williams and Wilmore to the space station was Starliner's first attempt to carry humans in space.

The spacecraft developed problems even before the launch — there was a helium leak in its propulsion system. It was not a serious enough problem for NASA to abandon the journey,

but on its way to the ISS, the spacecraft developed more problems. However, it was able to reach its destination safely.

The ISS, which is used primarily by the US and Russia, has never been without an astronaut since November 2000. Astronauts usually spend a few weeks to a few months carrying out experiments and studies before being replaced by another set.

Missions to the ISS are planned well in advance, and spacecraft and rockets are built to meet the schedule. That is why an alternative space vehicle to bring back Williams and Wilmore could not be arranged immediately. The next spacecraft was scheduled to go to the ISS only by February 2025.

Williams and Wilmore are experienced astronauts, and were in no discernible discomfort. Thus, NASA did not rush to bring them back either. The ISS is large enough to accommodate 10-12 astronauts at any given time. It usually has fewer people — it is only during times of changeover that it is occupied to near-full capacity.

Blessing in disguise

Williams and Wilmore could be very useful in NASA's ongoing study to assess the response of human bodies to long stays in space. They had not trained to spend so much time at the ISS and their bodies might have reacted differently compared to others who prepare sufficiently for extended stays.

NASA and other space agencies are preparing to set up a permanent science facility on the Moon that will require humans to remain in space for extended periods. As such, it has been running a program to study the health impacts of long-period stays in space. US astronauts flying to the ISS can now volunteer to be part of such experiments.

Past studies have shown that bone density and muscle quality deteriorate faster in space than on Earth. Low gravity impacts brain fluids, and extended stays can potentially alter brain structure. Extended stays can also increase the risk of heart disease.

Williams and Wilmore can provide the opportunity for researchers to also study the mental and psychological impacts of being stranded in space, with their return to Earth uncertain.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

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