

75 shortlisted students from Pune ZP schools to visit ISRO & NASA

Kimaya Boralkar

puneletters@hindustantimes.com

PUNE: In a first-of-its-kind initiative to bridge the gap between rural and urban access to advanced science education while inspiring rural students to dream big and pursue careers in science and technology, the Pune Zilla Parishad (ZP) in collaboration with the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) on August 19 finalised a list of 75 students who will soon get the rare opportunity to visit the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in Bengaluru and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in Washington, DC. Of the 75 shortlisted students, 50 will visit ISRO while the remaining 25 will visit NASA. This is part of the 'Curious Rural Student Exposure Programme' launched on April 25, 2025, through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between IUCAA and the Pune ZP. Deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar, who attended the

MoU signing, praised the initiative saying, "Visits to ISRO and NASA will not only educate but also inspire our rural students to dream big."

The programme comprised a three-stage selection process, beginning with a large-scale written examination held on July 5 across 141 centres in Pune district. Eligible candidates included students from ZP schools studying in classes 6 and 7. Out of 16,121 students who registered, 13,671 appeared for the exam conducted in multiple-choice format. At the second stage, an online test was held on July 19 that was taken by 1,541 students. Based on these students' performance, 235 students were shortlisted for personal interviews conducted at the IUCAA between August 6 and 8. At the third stage, 75 students were selected for the exposure visits with 50 travelling to ISRO and the remaining 25 travelling to NASA. The final 25 students chosen for the NASA visit include four each from Shirur

**Shubhra Renuse**

and Khed talukas; two each from Ambegaon, Baramati, Bhor, Daund, Haveli and Mulshi; and one each from Indapur, Junnar, Maval, Purandar and Rajgad. The Pune ZP has already started planning the students' travel arrangements, with the ISRO visit scheduled in the coming months and the NASA visit to follow.

Pune ZP CEO Gajanan Patil said "This initiative marks a milestone in rural education. We believe talent is abundant in our villages, and our goal is to improve the quality of educa-

**Bhaskar Taware**

tion across the entire district. The 75 selected students will get the opportunity to visit ISRO and NASA, inspiring them to dream bigger and broaden their horizons. The remaining students will be rewarded with visits to the Nehru Planetarium, GMRT Khodad and Rashtrapati Bhavan, ensuring that every deserving child is celebrated."

Bhaskar Taware, a student from ZP Adarsh Primary School, Sangavi, who is among the 75 students shortlisted for the exposure tours, told Hindustan Times, "I am in class 7 and

was preparing for this exam online. My teacher, Sunita Khate, helped me a lot to clear every concept. The first-level exam was very hard for me, and I did not expect to crack it. The interview was easier, and they asked astronomy-related questions. My father works in a factory, and I never imagined that a student like me could ever get a chance to go to NASA. I am feeling so happy and really excited to see how scientists conduct research at NASA. In future, I want to build my career in this field. I even spent my entire summer vacation studying for the exam."

Shubhra Renuse, a student from ZP Primary School, Pabe, who is also among the 75 shortlisted students, said, "My father died in an accident when I was a child, and my mother raised me. It is a really great opportunity for me to be able to go and see NASA. I studied very hard for it. During the summer, we did not go anywhere because of this exam. My teachers also worked very hard; we used to study

every night from 8 pm to 11 pm, solving tests and mock papers which made it easier. Block education officer Sangram Patil also conducted mock interviews for all selected students to give us an idea of how to face the interview. That gave me confidence, and I already knew I would clear this exam. I am missing my father; he would have been very happy for me."

The programme is not limited to just foreign exposure tours. A year-long enrichment component has been designed, featuring hands-on science workshops, interactive activities, lectures by experts, and guided visits to science centres across India.

This will ensure that the selected students continue to benefit academically and personally from the experience, even after their visits are over. This pioneering initiative is expected to become a model for similar science outreach programmes across the country, opening new horizons for India's rural youth.