

Moonshot fires vision of Indian Google Earth

James Lament

After conquering the moon, Indian scientists have their eyes trained on Google Earth.

Only weeks after the blastoff of India's first unmanned moon mission, the country's space agency plans to launch its own equivalent of Google Earth, the virtual globe programme, using its satellite network to create a high resolution web-based mapping system. The service, initially covering only India, will be offered at no cost to web users.

The Bangalore-based Indian Space Research Organisation hopes to have a prototype of Bhuvan - the Sanskrit for Earth - ready by the end of the month and is aiming for a public launch by March.

"We've created a lot of value added products out of satellite data of the Indian region," said V. Jayaraman, a research director at Isro, yesterday.

"We will introduce [Bhuvan] in phases. Over the next three to four months, the first lot [of map data] will come out and then more in a systematic manner."

The state-owned project is a big step in India's ambitious development of space technology. Last month, India launched Chan-drayaan-1, its first moon mission 33 years after sending up its first satellite with support from the Soviet Union. Since 1975, India has launched 50 of its own satellites and prides itself on being at the forefront of the technology, competing with EADS, Mitsui, Raytheon and Boeing.

Tomorrow promises to be a crowning moment for the Indian space programme. Its lunar orbiter is expected to drop a probe painted in the colours of the Indian flag on to the surface of the moon -establishing India's presence alongside that of the US, Russia and Japan on the moon.

Although critics argue that India can ill-afford a regional space race with other starstruck countries such as China and Japan and should address terrestrial matters such as poverty alleviation, India's scientific community is unrepentant. Earlier this week, scientists said they were in the advanced stages of designing the Aditya spacecraft to study the outermost region of the sun.

Officials claim that the Bhuvan system will be able to supply more precise images than Google Earth and other, services by zooming in to a distance of 10 metres. The images on the system will also be updated once a year - more frequently than competitors. But Indian officials declined to give details of the project's cost.

The space agency said that Bhuvan's information would be given to government agencies for urban planning, traffic management and water and crop monitoring. Although the service will be available at no cost to web users, the agency is working out how to charge for higher resolution images.

The development, in co-operation with India's software industry, has driven expectations that India may launch its own global positioning system, allowing for the commercial sale of TomTom-like devices for cars. India is already seeking to develop a satellite-based global aviation navigation system.

"GPS will be part of the whole thing," said Dr Jayaraman.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, November 14 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 5.