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Over the moon

Rrishi Raote / New Delhi July 18, 2009, 0:09 IST

Forty years ago next Monday, Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins reached the moon. It really was a staggering achievement, considering that the first ever satellite went up only in late 1957. Sputnik was scarcely more accomplished than a toaster oven — yet just 12 years later Apollo 11 won America the space race.

Twelve Americans had stood on the moon by 1972 — and then Nixon nixed the Apollo programme. The focus had shifted from Kennedy's rabid Cold Warring in space to Vietnam and other things. Never since has any human gone beyond near-Earth orbit. This means that, as far as modern space travel goes, science fiction is light years ahead of science fact. There are no orbiting towns, no moon colonies, no interplanetary travel.

Kennedy, who wasn't interested in space, was willing to set the ambitious goal in 1961 of getting a man on the moon within the 1960s. He understood that this was less about science than self-regard. Glory is worth investing in, especially for a democracy. Now that India and China can afford it, that's what we are doing. Our fledgling moon missions amount to little more than patriotic flag-planting. America, which has been there and done that, is now fixated on its costly and inefficient shuttles, and the cash-hog International Space Station.

Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin is one of those who worry about this humble scale of human objectives in space. He recently published a second book of memoirs. There followed a flurry of interviews. To the *Wall Street Journal* Aldrin said of today's astronauts, "I hope they'll have a different long-term objective than going to the moon a couple of times, retiring and playing golf. We ought to have settler astronauts who can touch down on Mars by 2029 or 2031, or certainly by 2035, which will be 66 years after we landed on the moon."

Then he added that "We need something to inspire hope in people. This country is lagging in engineering, science and math. We need to inspire teachers and students to get into productive areas, not just thinking about making money."

As far as schoolchildren are concerned, that should be easy. Thousands of books have resulted from the US space programme — Armstrong and Collins themselves wrote a few (ghostwritten, of course, because astronauts of that era were jocks, not writers). Since the 1980s, after the National Air and Space Museum opened in Washington, DC, and since NASA cleverly started producing reading and teaching material for children, several astronauts of the early era have written books for young readers on their experiences in space.

The method combines Richard Scarry with Roald Dahl. There is the Scarry-esque big picture, where a multitude of individual tasks produces a grand result. The astronauts all point out how their own achievement was founded on the toil of scientists, engineers and planners. And Dahl knew that children adore dirty details. Thus such books as William Pogue's *How Do You Go to the Bathroom in Space?* (1991), and Alan Bean's wonderful *My Life as an Astronaut* (1988).

The thing is, why look as far as outer space for inspiration? There's matter at hand. How about children's books, like Bean's and Pogue's, on the making of the Metro, the Sea Link, city water treatment, a mint, a cargo ship, tanks and missiles, technology at an archaeological dig, how Mumbai's BEST works, a religious pilgrimage site, a giant steel plant... Reading them, children may begin to understand that the world and its parts are an amazing set of interlocking systems — an echo of the little blue-green home planet the astronauts looked back at from the surface of the moon.

[\(rrishi.raote@bsmail.in\)](mailto:rrishi.raote@bsmail.in)

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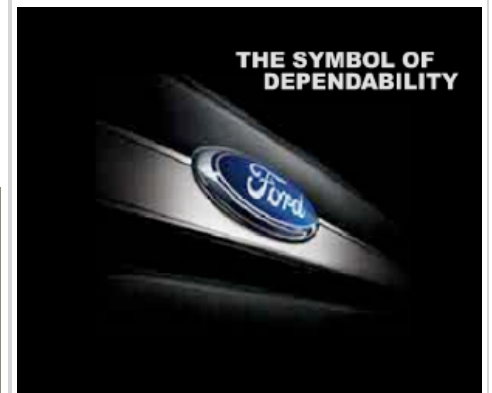
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