Safe from space: On the return of the NASA mission space crew
NASA did well to follow **established protocol** in bringing astronauts back

In the early hours (IST) of March 19, 2025, a SpaceX crew capsule bearing NASA astronauts Sunita Williams, Barry Wilmore, Nick Hague, and Roscosmos **cosmonaut** Aleksandr Gorbunov **splashed down off** Florida. Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore had returned to the earth after nine months in the International Space Station (ISS), whereas they had originally been expected to spend eight days **in the course of** testing Boeing's Starliner **crew** capsule. The Starliner **saga** has now **concluded**, but not before it **twisted** the reality of human spaceflight out of context, making it sound like a **caper** rather than a **testament** to the **virtues** of protocol. **Following** Starliner's launch in June 2024, a **series** of **malfunctions left** Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore **onboard** the ISS before the capsule returned empty to the ground in September. The **events spurred** concerns and **indignation** in the popular imagination, **swirling** around a **dearth** of information both NASA and Boeing **were reluctant** to fill. As their stay was expanded to nine months, curiosity **swelled** over their **well-being**. While this response was natural, **speculation fuelled** by insufficient updates and political propaganda in the U.S. also **fanned** misinformation that cast Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore as having been "**stranded**" in space.

If the "stranded" **narrative** captures the **gist** of Starliner's failure, it misses the **inalienable contingencies** at the heart of human spaceflight. Ms. Williams herself has **sought** to **downplay** the use of such terms. Over the years, but especially **in the wake of** the Challenger and Columbia **shuttle** disasters in 1986 and 2003, NASA has **instituted** procedures its personnel are required to follow in a variety of situations where events **buck** a pre-planned sequence. One is that astronauts onboard malfunctioning spacecraft can move to the ISS, which is always prepared to **host** such visitors. But many actors framed NASA as **weak-willed** for **sticking** to its protocols. When it **scrubbed** a prior launch attempt of the capsule that returned the astronauts for technical reasons, **supporters** of U.S. President Donald Trump **accused** the agency **of infirmity** rather than **acknowledging** it as a well-known safety measure. **Narratives** that **overlook** the simple fact that two **veterans** were picked to pilot Starliner's first crewed flight **belie** the existence of multiple safety checkpoints and the great lengths to which space agencies go to ensure one unexpected **outcome** does not **spell catastrophe**. **People**, including in India — where concern for Ms. Williams **parallels** a growing pride in the country's **budding** human spaceflight programme **owing to** her Indian **ancestry** — **would** do well to replace **notions** of **triumphalism** in space with good old "safety first". Also, space agencies should realise the importance of clear, timely communication as an **integral** part of safety protocol.   **[Practice Exercise]**

- Red/blue coloring of words in the sentence indicates subject verb relationship; where 'red' denotes 'subject' and 'blue' denotes 'verb'.
- **Cosmonaut** (noun) – a Russian astronaut.
- Weak-willed (adjective) – lacking the ability to resist the influence of other people or to control one's own impulses. कमजोर इरादों वाली

Vocabulary

1. **Established** (adjective) – Recognized, Accepted, Proven, Traditional, Settled स्थापित

2. **Protocol** (noun) – Procedure, Guideline, Rule, Standard, Framework प्रोटोकॉल

3. **Splash down** (phrasal verb) – (of a spacecraft) land on water. पानी में उतरना

4. **Off** (preposition) – Near, Close to, Beside, Alongside, Adjacent to के पास

5. **In the course of** (phrase) – During, Throughout, Over, While, Amidst के दौरान

6. **Crew** (noun) – Team, Staff, Personnel, Squad, Unit दल

7. **Saga** (noun) – Story, Tale, Narrative, Chronicle, Episode गाथा

8. **Conclude** (verb) – End, Finish, Complete, Terminate, Wrap up समाप्त करना

9. **Twist** (verb) – Distort, Misrepresent, Alter, Misinterpret, Manipulate मोड़ना

10. **Caper** (noun) – an illicit or ridiculous activity or escapade. बेहूदा मजाक

11. **Testament** (noun) – Proof, Evidence, Testament, Confirmation, Demonstration साक्ष्य

12. **Virtue** (noun) – Quality, Merit, Advantage, Strength, Excellence गुण

13. **Following** (preposition) – After, Subsequent to, In the wake of, Post, Behind के बाद

14. **Malfunction** (noun) – Failure, Breakdown, Glitch, Defect, Fault खराबी

15. **Onboard** (verb) – Embark, Load, Enlist, Join, Enter सवार होना

16. **Spur** (verb) – Encourage, Stimulate, Prompt, Provoke, Motivate प्रेरित करना

17. **Indignation** (noun) – Anger, Outrage, Resentment, Fury, Wrath आक्रोश

18. **Swirl** (verb) – Spin, Whirl, Twirl, Circulate, Churn घूमना

19. **Dearth** (noun) – Lack, Shortage, Scarcity, Deficiency, Absence कमी

20. **Reluctant** (adjective) – Hesitant, Unwilling, Resistant, Disinclined, Averse अनिच्छुक

21. **Swell** (verb) – Increase, Grow, Expand, Rise, Surge बढ़ना

22. **Well-being** (noun) – Health, Welfare, Happiness, Comfort, Prosperity कल्याण

23. **Speculation** (noun) – Guess, Conjecture, Hypothesis, Assumption, Theory अटकल

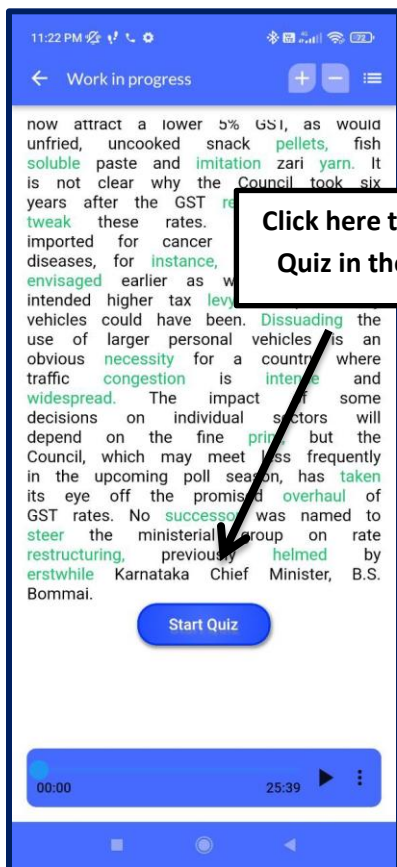24. **Fuel** (verb) – Stimulate, Encourage, Provoke, Ignite, Inflame भड़काना

25. **Fan** (verb) – Stir, Whip up, Inflame, Aggravate, Intensify भड़काना

26. **Stranded** (adjective) – Marooned, Abandoned, Isolated, Trapped, Deserted फंसा हुआ

27. **Narrative** (noun) – Story, Account, Tale, Chronicle, Report कथा

28. **Gist** (noun) – Essence, Core, Main point, Summary, Substance मुख्य बिंदु

29. **Inalienable** (adjective) – Unassailable, Absolute, Inviolable, Sacrosanct, Untouchable अविच्छेद्य

30. **Contingency** (noun) – Possibility, Eventuality, Emergency, Uncertainty, Risk आकस्मिकता

31. **Seek** (verb) – Pursue, Search, Aim, Strive, Request तलाश करना

32. **Downplay** (verb) – Understate, Minimize, Underplay, Diminish, Belittle कम करके बताना

33. **In the wake of** (phrase) – After, Following, Subsequent to, As a result of, Post के बाद

34. **Shuttle** (noun) – It is short for space shuttle. शटल

35. **Institute** (verb) – Establish, Create, Found, Launch, Initiate स्थापित करना

36. **Buck** (verb) – Resist, Oppose, Defy, Challenge, Withstand विरोध करना

37. **Host** (verb) – Accommodate, Welcome, Entertain, Lodge, Receive मेजबानी करना

38. **Stick** (to) (verb) – Adhere, Follow, Abide by, Comply, Persist पालन करना

39. **Scrub** (verb) – Cancel, Abandon, Halt, Stop, Call off रद्द करना

40. **Accuse** (of) (verb) – Blame, Charge, Indict, Implicate, Allege आरोप लगाना

41. **Infirmity** (noun) – Weakness, Frailty, Disability, Ailment, Debility कमजोरी

42. **Acknowledge** (verb) – Admit, Recognize, Accept, Concede, Confirm स्वीकार करना

43. **Overlook** (verb) – Ignore, Neglect, Miss, Disregard, Skip नज़रअंदाज़ करना

44. **Veteran** (noun) – Expert, Professional, Seasoned, Experienced, Master दिग्गज

45. **Belie** (verb) – Contradict, Misrepresent, Disguise, Conceal, Mask झुठलाना

46. **Outcome** (noun) – Result, Consequence, Effect, Conclusion, End परिणाम

47. **Spell** (verb) – Mean, Signify, Indicate, Imply, Herald मतलब होना

48. **Catastrophe** (noun) – Disaster, Calamity, Tragedy, Mishap, Crisis तबाही

49. **Parallel** (verb) – Match, Correspond, Resemble, Echo, Mirror समानांतर होना

50. **Budding** (adjective) – Growing, Developing, Emerging, Flourishing बढ़ता हुआ,

51. **Owing to** (phrase) – Due to, Because of, Thanks to, As a result of, On account of के कारण

52. **Ancestry** (noun) – Heritage, Lineage, Descent, Origin, Pedigree वंश

53. **Notion** (noun) – Idea, Concept, Belief, Thought, Perception धारणा

54. **Triumphalism** (noun) – Boastfulness, Arrogance, Overconfidence, Pride, Exultation विजयोल्लास

55. **Integral** (adjective) – Essential, Fundamental, Crucial, Vital, Necessary अभिन्न
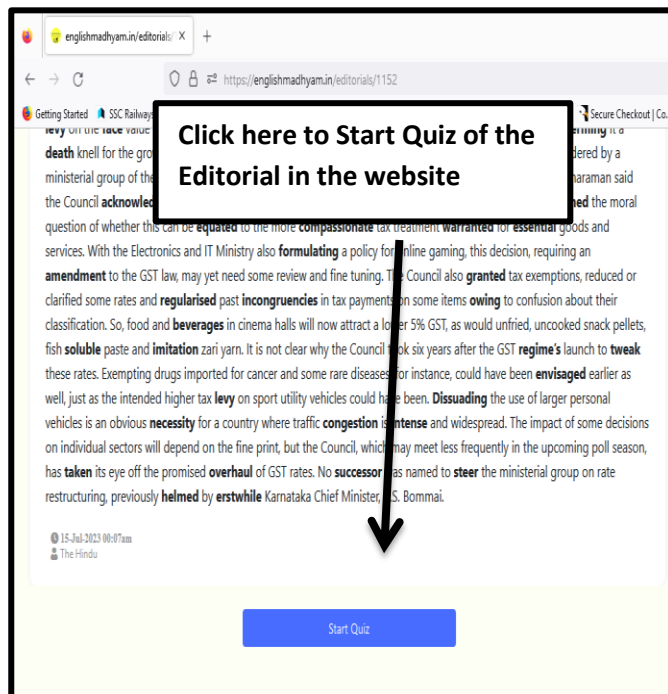
Summary of the Editorial

1. **Successful Return**: On March 19, 2025, a SpaceX crew capsule safely returned NASA astronauts Sunita Williams, Barry Wilmore, Nick Hague, and Roscosmos cosmonaut Aleksandr Gorbunov to Earth, splashing down off Florida.

2. **Extended Stay**: Williams and Wilmore spent nine months on the ISS, far longer than the originally planned eight days, due to malfunctions with Boeing's Starliner crew capsule.

3. **Starliner Saga**: The Starliner mission, intended to test Boeing's capsule, faced multiple malfunctions after its June 2024 launch, leading to the astronauts' prolonged stay on the ISS.

4. **Public Concerns**: The extended mission sparked public concern and misinformation, with some portraying Williams and Wilmore as "stranded" in space.

5. **NASA's Protocol**: NASA adhered to established safety protocols, including the option for astronauts to stay on the ISS if their spacecraft malfunctioned.

6. **Misinformation**: Insufficient updates from NASA and Boeing, combined with political propaganda, fueled speculation and misinformation about the astronauts' situation.

7. **Downplaying "Stranded" Narrative**: Williams herself rejected the "stranded" narrative, emphasizing the importance of safety protocols in spaceflight.

8. **Historical Context**: NASA's protocols were strengthened after the Challenger (1986) and Columbia (2003) shuttle disasters to handle unexpected situations.

9. **Criticism of NASA**: Some critics, including supporters of former U.S. President Donald Trump, accused NASA of being weak-willed for adhering to safety measures, such as scrubbing a prior launch attempt.

10. **Veteran Astronauts**: Williams and Wilmore, both experienced astronauts, were chosen for Starliner's first crewed flight, highlighting NASA's emphasis on safety and preparedness.

11. **Safety Checkpoints**: The mission underscored the multiple safety checkpoints and rigorous measures space agencies implement to prevent catastrophic outcomes.

12. **Global Attention**: Williams' Indian ancestry drew significant attention in India, where pride in the country's growing human spaceflight program is rising.

13. **Triumphalism vs. Safety**: The episode serves as a reminder to prioritize safety over triumphalism in space exploration.

14. **Importance of Communication**: Clear and timely communication from space agencies is crucial to prevent misinformation and maintain public trust.

15. **Lessons Learned**: The Starliner mission highlights the need for robust safety protocols, transparent communication, and public understanding of the inherent risks in human spaceflight.
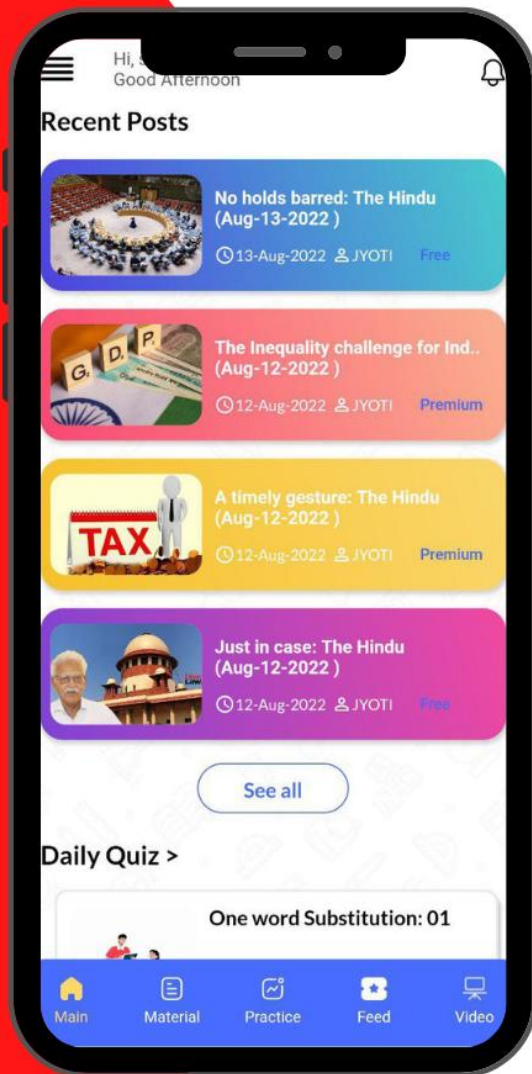
Practice Exercise: Banking Pattern Based

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