

ISRO Spy Case : A History

The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has gotten back into launching commercial satellites after a two-year break. On Sunday, 15th September 2018, ISRO'S trusted workhorse Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle-C42 (PSLV) carried the satellites, NovaSAR and S1-4, together weighing over 800 kilograms, at lift off. In an official ISRO release, it was stated – “The foreign satellites, meant for forest mapping and flood and disaster monitoring, among other uses, would be released into sun synchronous orbit at a height of 583 km”. These satellites were developed by Surrey Satellite Technologies, Ltd., United Kingdom. The mission was arranged by Antix Corporation, the commercial wing of ISRO.

However, this launch is not the only reason ISRO has been in the news lately. Recently, we saw the resolution of the long suffering “ISRO Spy Case”, with the Supreme Court awarding former ISRO scientist S. Nambi Narayanan Rs. 50 lakh compensation for the sufferings he underwent after being arrested throughout the whole ordeal. He says the fight is finally over for him, after 24 long years. The court held that the scientist's arrest was needless and unnecessary while acknowledging that he was subjected to immense mental and physical torture. It was also ordered that a three-member panel headed by former Supreme Court judge DK Jain be set up. Their main function was to probe the framing of Narayanan in the spy case, and also granted him a compensation of Rs 50 lakh.

In light of this resolution, let us re-examine the now infamous 1994 “ISRO Spy Case” once more, from a 2018 perspective.

The ‘ISRO spy case’ was about a bunch of space scientists, including Narayanan, and businessmen who were accused of being lured by foreign spies and charged with passing on blueprints of rocket engines in the 1990s. It eventually emerged that there was no scandal and organisations, from the Central Bureau of Investigation to the Supreme Court, gave a clean chit to the accused.

The ISRO spy case first surfaced in 1994 when ISRO scientists S. Nambi Narayanan and D Sasi Kumar were arrested on charges of handing over India's indigenous space technology to Pakistan with the help of two Maldivian women who overstayed their visas in India. The case led to a setback for both scientist's careers, and caused significant delays in development of the cryogenic engine programme, meant to power the heavy lift Geosynchronous Launch Vehicle (GSLV).

The case technically began on 20 October, 1994, when the Kerala Police in Thiruvananthapuram filed a case against a Maldivian citizen Mariam Rasheeda, under Section 14 of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and Section 7 of the Foreigners Order, 1948. She was arrested on the charges of overstaying her visa that led to the surprise arrests of Narayanan, the director of ISRO's cryogenic project lab, his deputy and several other persons.

The arrest was soon followed by the police concocting a theory that Rasheeda was in contact with Narayanan and Sasi with the help of a businessman and the two scientists had agreed to transfer technological secrets with Pakistan. However, this was later also named the ISRO scientists, along with Russian Space Agency Glavkosmos's India representative Chandrasekhar, another Maldivian national Fauzia Hassan, and Bengaluru-based labour contractor SK Sharma.

Of course, the whole situation was resolved when the CBI cleared them in 1995. However, then Narayanan had been forced to fight legal battles since then. He had to clear his name, and receive compensation and justice. There had to be action taken against three police officials who destroyed his reputation, career, and subjected him to torture. The three police officials in question are now retired - then top police officer Siby Mathews, KK Joshua and S Vijayan.

In Narayanan's Book and Memoir, *"Ready To Fire: How India and I Survived the ISRO Spy Case"*, Narayanan gives a full account of the ordeal. There are some truly bizarre moments including trying to get Narayanan confess to the crime through prompts like "Just give us a Muslim name", and getting him to confess to meeting people he had never heard of before, just to fit a ridiculous narrative.

"You clearly don't understand rocket science. There are no classified drawings and no drawing has gone out of ISRO. Even if some get the drawings, they can't make such an engine without active collaboration with us for several years. If you don't know, India doesn't have a cryogenic engine; we are still struggling to make one."

- Narayanan, responding to a policeman's accusation of selling "drawings to Pakistan". Taken from "Ready to Fire"

Why would someone create such a false narrative? Who benefits?

As with many things in India, the answer involves some truly messy politics. Threads have been weaved connecting Rasheeda and a senior police officer at that time, Raman Shrivastava. With his eye on professional gain - Siby Mathews who was a DIG at the time wanted Shrivastava out of his way. It is alleged that there was an underlying motive to take revenge and frame Rashida and Shrivastava.. This was supplemented by one of the most bitter political rivalries that Kerala witnessed – between then chief minister K Karunakaran, who shared a bitter relationship with AK Antony (also of the Congress). One of the reasons perhaps that nobody encouraged the police to drop a concocted case was that Shrivastava's conviction cast doubt on Karunakaran, who was eventually forced to quit in March 1995 - under pressure from Antony and other sources.

The Intelligence Bureau (IB) too played a controversial role in leading the Kerala police down the espionage route. It was only when the CBI looked at the evidence in December 1994 that they found the whole case was a made-up concoction and that the people were being framed. The role of the IB in this manner has led to some speculation on whether the whole affair was arranged by foreign powers, particularly by the US. This has been alluded to in Narayanan's book as well.

Within a month of their arrests, it was clear via the CBI investigation that whole case was based on zero facts. Even as Narayanan and Sasi got bail in January, Karunakaran came under pressure from the Antony faction and was forced out of office in March 1995. Rashida was only released in 1998. In May 1996, the CBI finally filed a report before the chief judicial magistrate saying that the espionage case was false and that there was no evidence to back the charges. The court accepted the report. All accused were released.

However, the entanglement with Kerala politics proved a crucial piece to the tale, with the police officers accused being protected by the state government and have in some part led to the bureaucratic delay in getting Narayanan back his compensation.

Today, the supreme court grants Narayanan both his compensation and a commission to look at the wrong doings done against him – but can any amount of compensation truly make up for what the man lost? Justice has been served in its own way, but the twenty-four year notice seems a hefty bill to pay.

This story is a great slice of India's space history, and in some sense, it has gotten a happy ending. On a personal scale - it is difficult for me, as a millennial, to reconcile this scandal with the image of ISRO that I had in my head. When an organisation that is as concerned with transparency as ISRO is gets caught up in what is essentially bureaucratic mess – it is a bit depressing. Maybe I'm being too

idealised when I say that I hope that bureaucracy would play less of a role in scientific research, but the least we can wish for is that at least it doesn't impede research, as in this story.