

“Ready to Fire: How India And I Survived the ISRO Spy Case”, by Nambi Narayanan with Arun Ram, Bllomsbury, Rs. 499/- (2018).

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On 30th November, 1994 Nambi Narayanan, the person leading the team to develop a liquid propulsion rocket engine at Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) was arrested by the Kerala police. He, along with several other ISRO employees and two Maldivian women were charged with working for Pakistan. The charge was that they had stolen the drawings and documents of the cryogenic engine from ISRO. Nambi Narayanan was supposed to be the man responsible for giving the drawings through a series of intermediaries to the Maldivian women.

The book under review is a recounting and the eventual denouement of this sensational case by Narayanan. It is also an autobiographical account of his life and career at ISRO.

Narayanan graduated as an engineer in 1965 and after a brief stint at a sugar factory, started working at ISRO in 1966 from where he retired in 2001. His long stint at ISRO also coincided with the evolution of ISRO from a small set up which launched sounding rockets from Thumba near Thiruvanthapuram, to the powerhouse that it is now.

In the seventies, ISRO developed the Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) which used a solid propellant. This was followed by the Augmented Satellite Launch Vehicle (ASLV) which was also solid fuelled. However, to be able to launch larger satellites, more efficient and powerful liquid fuelled engines were required. There was a lot of resistant within ISRO to go in for this technology as opposed to the time tested solid propellant one. Narayanan, a passionate believer in liquid propulsion technology, was chosen by Satish Dhawan, who was heading ISRO, to lead a team to bring the technology from the French and then later indigenise it.

The book comprises of two parallel narratives- one is the incarceration of Narayanan and his subsequent travails with the investigative agencies and the judiciary; the other is mostly his role in developing and testing the first liquid propulsion engine. The ISRO part of the book gives a good insight into the evolution and the working of this behemoth. Narayanan does not pull any punches in describing the decline in ISRO's leadership from the idealistic Sarabhai to the present dispensation. The initial years of ISRO in the sixties were also years of tremendous economic stress for the nation. These were the days of “from ship to mouth” and it was only Sarabhai's closeness to the highest echelons of power that was instrumental in space research getting the necessary resources. Dhawan and U.R. Rao who followed him at the helm, played a critical role in building ISRO's capabilities in rocket and satellite technology. The fact that ISRO was an autonomous organisation, directly under the Prime Minister undoubtedly helped.

Narayanan's account of his time at ISRO, though a bit tedious at times with a lot of details about his many colleagues, does have its interesting bits. When the nose cone of one of the rockets developed by a team led by Abdul Kalam (who was then at ISRO) got ejected on the launch pad itself, someone quipped "Oh Kalam, you just had premature ejaculation!". Or when T.N. Seshan, then in-charge of administration at ISRO offered an opinion on some technological deal with the French. He was told by Dhawan, "Seshan, this is technology. You please focus on administration". Not to take a snub lying down, the redoubtable Seshan got back to Dhawan later. When asked his opinion on something else later, a poker faced Seshan retorted, "It's technology Sir. I will focus on administration"!

The narrative of the espionage case is, as expected, a lot racier. Sex, money, political intrigue, international spy agencies, commercial competition, and greed- it has all the ingredients of a classic spy thriller. However, what comes out is a story of how the investigative agencies, in this case the Kerala police and the Intelligence Bureau, used all the dirty tricks of the trade (including torture and blackmail) to extract confessions to buttress a pre conceived narrative. It is a riveting read though at times a bit melodramatic.

The book could do with some serious editing- there are too many repetitions in the book, sometimes in the same chapter. This, plus the many grammatical errors jar in an otherwise immensely readable book. There are also some factual errors (the Chinese aggression was in 1962 and not in 1964). One hopes that the publisher will take care of these in the final version.

Narayanan and all the other accused were finally exonerated of all charges by the Supreme Court in 1998. This brought the whole sordid saga to an end. However, Narayanan is still fighting a case for compensation and criminal action against the police officials who framed him. Developing a rocket might have been simpler compared to negotiating the Indian criminal justice system. As he quips in the book, "Life is not always rocket science"!

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