# 1994 espionage case - Nambi Narayanan - SC's Orders to CBI

## Why in news?

The Supreme Court has asked the CBI to probe the alleged framing of former ISRO scientist Nambi Narayanan in an espionage case in 1994 and directed it to file a report in 3 months.

## What has the Supreme Court said?

- The Supreme Court has accepted the Justice DK Jain Committee report.
  - The committee was appointed by the top court in 2018.
  - It had submitted its report to the Supreme Court recently in a sealed cover.
  - It is said to have found "acts of omission and commission" by "responsible officials" in Kerala Government in the ISRO spying case.
  - The case was proved to be a false case.
- The SC has asked the Centre to hand over the report to the CBI for further probe.
- It has directed the CBI to treat the Jain Committee report as a preliminary inquiry report and proceed further.
- The Court also made it clear that the committee's report could not be made public and could not be shared with anyone, including former ISRO scientist S Nambi Narayanan.

## What was the espionage case?

- While working at ISRO, Narayanan was accused of selling vital secrets associated with Indian space technology to Pakistan.
- In October 1994, Kerala police in Thiruvananthapuram had registered a case against Mariam Rasheeda, a Maldivian national.
- Case was registered under Section 14 of the Foreigners Act 1946 and Section 7 of the Foreigners Order, 1948.
- The initial charges against her were of overstaying in India following the cancellation of her flight to Maldives.
- Following her interrogation, the police made out a case that she had contacted ISRO space scientists who were suspected of having transferred cryogenic engine technology to Pakistan through her.

- The following month, the police arrested Narayanan and another ISRO scientist, D. Sasikumaran.
- In 1996, the CBI submitted its closure report in the chief judicial magistrate's court in Kochi.
- It said that the allegations of espionage were unproven and false.
- The court admitted the closure report, leading to the discharge of all those who had been implicated.
- Narayanan was thus acquitted by a CBI court and the Supreme Court in 1998.
- However, he spent a total of 50 days in jail along with fellow scientist D Sasikumar and four others.

- **SC relief** - The case cost the 76-year-old former ISRO scientist his career and over two decades of his life and academic work.

- The Supreme Court awarded a compensation of Rs 50 lakh to Nambi Narayanan in 2018, saying he was "unnecessarily arrested and harassed" by the Kerala Police.

## What is Narayanan's stance?

- Narayanan considers the spy case as a conspiracy against him and the ISRO.
- He alleges the collective efforts of agents of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in connivance with Indian police and intelligence officers.
- The case was produced in order to stall India's rapid advancements in the development of an indigenous cryogenic rocket engine.

## What was the cryogenic rocket engine issue?

- Narayanan was working in-charge of the cryogenics division at ISRO.
- He foresaw the need for liquid fuelled engines for ISRO's future civilian space programmes.
- He thus introduced the technology in India as early as the 1970s, the same technology which later he was accused of selling.
- In 1992, ISRO finalised a deal with Russia for transfer of technology to develop cryogenic-based fuels.
- However, due to pressure from US and France on Russia, the deal was called off.
- Nonetheless, a new agreement with Russia was signed to fabricate four cryogenic engines without a formal transfer of technology.
- Tenders were floated and a consensus had already been reached with Kerala Hitech Industries Limited (Keltch) which would have provided the cheapest tender for fabricating engines.
- But, at the peak of his career, the scientist got stuck in the 'ISRO spy case'.

## What is the significance of the CBI probe?

- The Supreme Court's order tasking the CBI to look into the Justice D.K. Jain committee report is a much-needed step forward.
- The case was based on unfounded suspicion.
- The probe would thus go a long way in ensuring accountability for the suspected frame-up.
- It should be noted that the Kerala government has been resisting calls for disciplinary action against the erring police officers.
- It opposed the CBI's closure report and tried to revive the investigation by its own police.
- However, the effort was shot down by the Supreme Court.
- It is imperative now to ensure that there are no further impediments to the CBI in proceeding with its investigation.
- Also, the process of restorative justice should lead to its logical conclusion.

**Source: The Hindu, The Indian Express, Tribune India**

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