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I did not know of the rocket scientist Nambi Narayanan, even though I have interacted with many such scientists in India. The film Rocketry: The Nambi Effect was a revelation. It accurately portrayed rocket science and technology and aptly introduced the web of international intrigue in which flamboyant scientists like Nambi may have gotten stuck in the latter half of the twentieth century. Nambi is a brilliant propulsion engineer with a Masters degree from Princeton University who forgoes a potential NASA career to work for India. This was quite common for high achievers in his generation, driven by nation-building and the calling of the Punya Bhumi to carve a place for India in the world order. The national goal of the time was to develop reliable and muscular liquid-propulsion rocket engines that could launch lucrative satellites, and India's Space-age industry, into orbit. ISRO puts Nambi at the front, with a charge to quickly acquire technology from anywhere in the world. Nambi spearheads technology development and transfer missions to England and then to France with resourcefulness and guile. His early successful projects are the French Viking Engine, and derived from that collaboration, the Indian Vikas Engine, which Nambi names for his mentor and the father of Indian Space Research, Dr Vikram Sarabhai.

The rough weather starts when Nambi is greenlighted by ISRO to acquire even more powerful cryogenic engine technology from the collapsing Soviet Union. Russia, cash-strapped but under heavy pressure of sanctions from the US, withdraws from the technology transfer deal. Nambi and his group of engineers manage to procure only a few off-the-shelf engines, with hopes to reverse-engineer it in India. But his bold plan goes awry, and with it crumbles Nambi's entire world. A curious case is framed on Nambi for

honey-trap based contacts and dealings with Pakistan through two Maldivian agents, and he is incarcerated in a typical Indian style of "guilty until proven innocent." When eventually released, he is possessed by a single-minded quest to recover his tarnished name and family honor.

He wins his personal war only after two decades, when the Supreme Court of India acquits his case, and the Government grants him high civilian honors. The movie, to its credit, does not take a side on the central "whodunit" question. Left wide open are ISRO's role in not backing Nambi and the possibility of a broader global conspiracy against India's Engine Man. In the film, the character Nambi emphasizes to the end his innocence on all nationally critical matters, any private indiscretions notwithstanding. Nambi holds the ground that he will not accept any apology from anyone until the perpetrators and the real villains that framed him are found. It may never happen. It is a movie worthy of respect for its accurate science, and for its colorful and memorable scientists -- in particular, their sacrifices, suffering and patriotism. This movie has a positive message about engineering, and it will resonate with a large domestic and international audience, especially NRIs. But did Nambi, the scientist, do the right thing? Nambi should have exercised utmost caution and due diligence and not pursued the cryogenics deal singlehandedly. He should not have allowed his excitement to get the better of international order and judgement. The adage that 'India can wait' still holds in the high-tech landscape.

Cryogenic engines were eventually developed by ISRO over the intervening years, but the global launch scene has changed. New aggressive players like SpaceX, Rocket Lab, and several other private players offer launches at even lower costs against which ISRO cannot easily compete. However, ISRO still has a major role in developing and delivering satellites and spacecraft to the outer world and making India proud, by interacting with the academic institutions in India and abroad. In these matters, the legacy of Nambi and his colleagues shines brightest.

(The writer is a Space Scientist, Aerospace Engineer and Educator, and professor at Vanderbilt University. Opinions are personal.)