

Eye in the sky

ISRO must open itself to public gaze, and not shy away from sharing its successes, failures

Anything that is related to space science, failure or success, is larger than life; for this is a new frontier for achievement and conquest within the realms of science and technology. The recent attempt by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to place an earth observation satellite (EOS-3) in a geosynchronous orbit using the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV-F10) ended in failure due to a 'performance anomaly' – a malfunctioning of the trusted rocket launcher. All seemed to be well as the stage two and three separated as planned, but when the time came for the cryogenic third stage to light up, there appeared to be a failure and an ensuing deviation from the expected path, as seen in the control panel. There was an immediate disruption in the telecast which had been showing a view of the control panel, and the camera veered towards troubled faces, discussion and probably efforts to salvage the mission. Finally, Dr. K. Sivan, Chairman of ISRO, announced in a short sentence that the mission could not be accomplished. Speculation may run rife about the reasons for this unexpected failure, after many successful launches since 2017. ISRO had fewer launches during the pandemic in 2020 than it did in earlier years. This particular launch had originally been planned for March 5, 2020 and was called off because of a technical glitch a few hours before the launch. It is also to be mentioned that the cryo engine in question is of a Russian design originally, unlike that of the GSLV Mark III rocket, which is indigenous.

The failure of this mission is worrying not only because it breaks a long, successful run, but because there are several important missions in the pipeline: Aditya-L1, the sun watcher, and the Gaganyaan mission, which will carry humans to space, are slated for the coming years. Thursday's failure will increase the stress on ISRO scientists to doubly make sure the chances of success in these missions. In the meantime, the impact of this failed mission is being kept away from interested citizens for now. For some time at least, there will be no official word on what actually happened and how the mission failed, and this owes in no small measure to the propensity of ISRO to cover up and enshroud events in mystery, especially mishaps. Admittedly, the stakes are high, in terms of investment and national pride, but scientists, of all people, should wear the belief that failure is as much part of the game as success. From a culture of warding off eyes, the organisation should embrace the limelight. ISRO indeed has many stories to tell of scientific endeavour, the method and the manner of progress; and as it opens its doors to the public gaze, it can only rise to the skies.