India loses communication with lunar satellite (Update)

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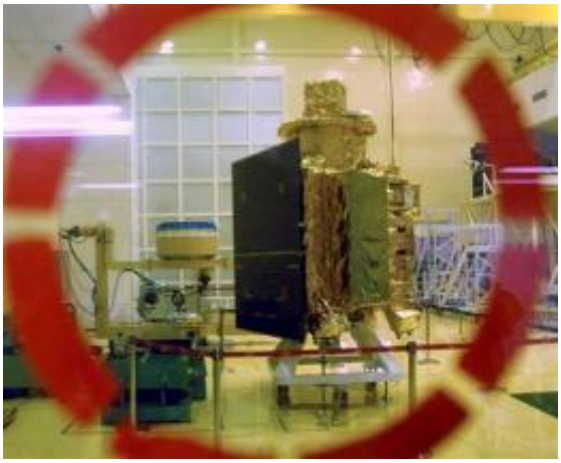

FILE - In this Sept. 18, 2008 file photo, The Chandrayaan 1 spacecraft, India's first unmanned mission to the Moon, is seen as it is unveiled at the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) Satellite Center in Bangalore, India. Scientists at India's national space agency said Saturday, Aug. 29, 2009, that all communication links with the country's only satellite orbiting the moon have snapped and they were unable to send commands to the spacecraft. Radio contact with Chandrayaan-1 spacecraft was abruptly lost early Saturday, said a statement issued by the Indian Space Research Organization. (AP Photo/File)

(AP) -- India's national space agency said communications with the country's only satellite orbiting the moon snapped Saturday and that its scientists were no longer controlling the spacecraft.

Radio contacts with Chandrayaan-1 spacecraft were abruptly lost at 0130

Saturday (2000 GMT Friday), the Indian Space Research Organization said.

The agency's monitoring unit near the southern city of Bangalore is no longer receiving data from the spacecraft, spokesman S. Satish told The Associated Press by telephone from Bangalore.

The spacecraft had completed 312 days in orbit and orbited the moon more than 3,400 times.

"We are studying the telemetry data and trying to figure out what is the problem," Satish said. The space agency had received a large volume of data from the spacecraft - which is slotted in an automatic orbit of the moon - and most of the scientific objectives of the mission had been met, he said.

The spacecraft had been controlled from a monitoring center at Byalalu, 18 miles (30 kilometers) southwest of Bangalore, sending it commands to change direction, speed and to focus the cameras. Satish said it was no longer receiving commands.

The launch of Chandrayaan-1 in October 2008 put India in an elite club of countries with moon missions. Other countries with similar satellites are the United States, Russia, the European Space Agency, Japan and China.

The US$80 million lunar spacecraft has had problems earlier too. In May, the satellite lost a critical instrument called the star sensor. Two months later, it overheated but scientists were able to salvage the craft and resume normal operations.

The spacecraft had completed around 95 per cent of the two-year mission's objectives, Satish said Saturday.

Scientists say the Chandrayaan project will boost India's capacity to build more efficient rockets and satellites, especially through miniaturization, and open research avenues for young Indian scientists.

India plans to follow the Chandrayaan, which means "moon craft" in Sanskrit, by landing a rover on the moon in 2011.