

December 19 2014 | Last updated 2 minutes ago

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Drone catches eyes at Mumbai engineering show

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Published: 18:33 December 17, 2014

GULF NEWS 

Mumbai: An unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), or drone, built by a Navi Mumbai-based company has been the star product at the ongoing 4th Edition of the India Engineering Sourcing Show in Mumbai, that began on Tuesday with participation of over 400 engineering companies.

The drone's claim to fame is that it made a brief appearance in Aamir Khan's super hit film "3 idiots" when engineering student Joy Lobo creates the 'flying spy camera'.

Mumbaikars also had a brush with the drones earlier this year when a pizza outlet made waves when it put up the video of their successful pilot of a pizza delivery using an UAV.

The company that showed off the drone — Idea Forge's UAV called NETRA — at the exhibition is into some

serious business though. Developed in collaboration with the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO), NETRA has been used extensively by the armed forces, paramilitary forces and other security agencies. It partnered with the National Disaster Response Force and played a crucial role in identifying survivors and assessing damage during the Uttarakhand floods last year. It was also deployed by the Gujarat government during the 2013 Bhuj floods. Their other clients include the National Security Guard, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and, Delhi Police among others.

The completely autonomous UAV can be launched from a small clearing by the road side and made to fly over the area of interest up to 400 metres. Fitted with GPS and powerful sensors, it can fly on its own and return to the home base after completing the mission. It boasts of having the smallest autopilot in the world. During its flight, the UAV sends continuous real-time video of every movement on the ground. Its vertical take off and landing mechanism makes it extremely user friendly.

Idea Forge was started by five IIT-Bombay graduates — Ankit Mehta, Vipul Joshi, Ashish Bhat, Amardeep Singh and Rahul Singh — in 2008. Though they belonged to different batches they were driven by one passion — robotics. Idea Forge got a \$1 million funding from the Technology Development Board of India and an angel investor later pumped in another \$100,000.

Though high on ideas, the IIT technocrats are conservative in their marketing approach. Idea Forge works mainly with government which makes its operations simpler as required permissions are usually taken care of. “We are still some distance away from commercial usage of drones,” says one of the partners.

Market estimates put the cost of an UAV at Rs2.5 million upwards.

Besides surveillance, drones have multifaceted applications — such as for aerial cinematography, replacing costly helicopter shooting, crowd management during festivals and fairs, aerial photography of high-rises and lately even wildlife management.