

# Ankit Mehta: Commercial use of drones to rise

IdeaForge co-founder Ankit Mehta speaks in an interview on the future of drones in India



IdeaForge co-founder Ankit Mehta.

**New Delhi:** While last year ended with the world's largest online retailer **Amazon** announcing that it was testing drones for making deliveries, this year kicked off with Panna National Park in Madhya Pradesh deploying drones to capture tiger movement and watching out for poachers, marking the advent of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for non-combat applications. **IdeaForge**, a company founded by three graduates of the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, has been deploying unmanned aerial systems for disaster management and crowd control since a year; and paramilitary forces are using its systems for counter-insurgency operations in Maoist-affected areas and for border security.

IdeaForge co-founder **Ankit Mehta** speaks in an interview on the future of drones in India for purposes as diverse as delivery of medicines and supplies during disasters, and traffic monitoring. He sees an explosion of unmanned aerial systems in the commercial and security space. Edited excerpts:

## What kind of applications have your UAVs been used for till now, besides security?

We have deployed it for crowd management and traffic monitoring. Gujarat Police used it for Jagannath Rath yatra, while Mumbai Police used it during Ganpati *visarjan*. We've done a number of demonstrations around political rallies, like we recently deployed one for **Narendra Modi**'s rally in Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai. Our systems have been used for traffic monitoring during Durga Puja in Kolkata. We deployed it in Uttarakhand for disaster management last year.

So, we have delivered our systems to National Disaster Response Force, which is planning to use these systems for these kinds of applications. So far we have deployed approximately 70-odd systems across the country, most of which are for homeland security, some of it in defence.

But the agenda is very clear: surveillance and reconnaissance, wherever you need an aerial or bird's eye view of an area.

## What kind of commercial uses for drones do you see in India in the near future?

Some of the commercial uses we are pitching for, and get a lot of enquiries for, are from big industrial houses. Basically in India, there is a huge amount of construction activity happening. So we want to deploy our systems where there are open construction sites, help them avoid their pilferage problems.

Crop monitoring is another activity that we envisage. Across the world, people are using these systems for monitoring the state of their crops, to catch any untoward incident happening and even to spray pesticides. In India, there are not a lot of individual farmers to justify such use. But here, maybe a group of farmers or a cooperative society could use our systems for crop monitoring and for spraying fertilizers. Most of the requests come from the imagery side. So, real estate companies that are building huge real estate projects want to use our systems to give a bird's eye view to their perspective buyers. We get such queries from Noida, Delhi and Bombay.

We get a lot of requests from cinematographers for shooting films or advertisements and things like that. Currently, a lot of these people need to use helicopters for aerial shots. UAVs would be far more economical and viable in terms of permissions and costs. So far, our focus was to pitch it to customers that had the most desperate need for systems like these, and those are our internal security personnel. But in the coming year, we are pitching our systems for various other applications and requests that are coming in.

## Do you see UAVs being used for deliveries in India in coming years?

We are working with some companies that do deliveries, and at least tried to set up some mock demos like Amazon did. It is not really far away, but it will take time to pick up in India, but it is not impossible. But this would literally mean explosion of systems in the air. It is something that we are looking at actively. A company has approached us to develop UAV applications for delivery of medicines in north India. It is something that we are very keen on exploring because often when there is a disaster, you cannot rescue everybody at the same time, but at least supplies like food and medicine can be delivered using our systems. A company in Mumbai that does midnight deliveries has shown interest, asking if they can do deliveries and conserve manpower.

**How important are guidelines and restrictions for the use of UAVs in India?**

There is going to be an explosion of induction of drones in India. I can safely say almost all paramilitary forces have our systems, they are being deployed for counter-insurgency, border management and other such operations, and this is likely to increase in the future. Slowly, a lot of companies who are looking to provide services in this space, like us, are going to increase the deployment of these systems in domestic and civil spaces as well, albeit this will have to be done with a lot of care and responsibility. This means taking the right permissions, by making sure whatever you're deploying is safe and tested, the right kind of backups, the right kind of measures have been taken to protect people's interests. It is important for India to frame guidelines, but if we start imposing restrictions that could kill the industry in the bud, it would be a huge loss. Whereas countries like the US are actually framing policies and planning to open internal space for use. There's a whole gamut of factors that needs to be looked at.