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## STARTUPS SERVE INDIA'S DEFENCE, AND PROFITABLY

FRIDAY, JANUARY 06, 2017 **BY** INDIANDEFENSE NEWS



**IdeaForge located in Bangalore makes the NETRA UAV** (Representational Image)

Last January, when the Pathankot district in Punjab came under cross-border firing, the Indian army depended heavily on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The soldiers used them for border surveillance. Those UAVs were built by IdeaForge, a small 100-people, Mumbai-based venture that was started in 2008 by three IIT-Bombay graduates.

IdeaForge's flagship product is Netra, which it jointly developed with the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO).

IdeaForge is among a growing number of innovative ventures that are catering to India's defence forces. For Bengaluru-based Tonbo Imaging, which makes digital imaging systems for military equipment like guns, UAVs, and battle tanks, almost 80% of revenue comes from the defence forces, while the rest comes from industries like power.

Axio Biosolutions of Bengaluru makes a sponge-like bandage that helps in blood clotting when pressed against a cut or a wound in the body. The product has been purchased by over 70 battalions of the Indian army. Leo Mavelly, who founded Axio Biosolutions in 2007, stopped exporting two months ago to meet the surge in domestic demand.

Mavelly thinks that with the Indian military's push for modernization, the demand for products like his will soar. "Under the new defence modernization initiatives, there's a lot of focus on preventing deaths," he says.

Alok Mukherjee, the scientist at DRDO who discovered IdeaForge at a conference in 2008 and who has been working with them on the UAVs since then, says it is easier to work with smaller companies. "They are willing to listen to your requirements and work accordingly. There is a lot of hunger within them and that reflects in their work as well," he says.

Mukherjee says it is a win-win for both sides because the DRDO provides startups with a control station and top-quality resources to work with. Gurgaon-based robotics company Hi-tech Robotics Systemz, and Pune-based Beta Control are some of the other startups that the DRDO works with.

However, there are challenges that comes with working with government organizations. "Getting payments on time is sometimes a problem. And that impacts investor sentiments," says Ankit Mehta, co-founder at IdeaForge, which recently raised Rs 70 crore from investors including WRV Capital, IndusAge Partners, and Infosys.

Tonbo's founder Arvind Lakshmikummar voices another issue: "In the defence sector, the bidding cycle is longer and there are a lot more checks and balances. But that is part of the process in winning those deals."

However, both IdeaForge and Tonbo are profitable. Mehta says that the commercial interest in the space is slowly building and innovative products will always command value in this space. "Every asset-heavy sector has been disrupted by technology barring defence, and we want to disrupt that sector," adds Lakshmikummar. He says that the defence procurement cycle in India has come down to 3 years, from 9 years earlier.

[Source>>](#)

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