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Aviation opportunities in the air in Bangalore, Hyderabad

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Anirvan Ghosh, ET Bureau Mar 6, 2010, 02.25am IST

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Bangalore, the joke goes, is the only place where Boeing ranks above Airbus—because the former's office is situated one floor above the latter's in the spanking new glass building on the Old Madras Road. While it's not too hard to guess where the joke originated from, on the ground, the competition to be the number one supplier to Indian carriers is quite intense, with Airbus currently in the lead.

If the turf war for the skies is heating up, then Bangalore is the battlefield royale. The city's rapid emergence as a centre for aviation and aerospace technologies can be attributed not only to the large number of scientific organisations and educational institutes in the city, but also its IT horsepower that is acting as the wind beneath the wings of aviation giants.

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Airbus, for example, has had an engineering centre in Bangalore since October 2007. Its engineers, hired from some of India's top engineering schools, are working on cutting-edge technology that would give Airbus a decisive advantage in the air. The current strength of the centre is around 120, but will grow to 400 people soon.

Boeing, not to be left behind, has set up an research and technology (R&T) centre in Bangalore, which now coordinates the work of more than 1,500 engineers working on projects across various vendors such as Infosys, HCL, TCS and Wipro.

"There is a big push at the top level to grow business in India in three to four years," Jean-Francoise Safouret, head of operations at Airbus Engineering Centre India (AECI) says. Airbus plans to outsource about 40% of its aircraft design to local companies here. And while it has similar engineering centres in Russia and China, Airbus says the bulk of work will now be done from India.

India is the fastest growing market for Airbus, with 68% of its future plane orders coming from this country. Airbus, whose best-known recent models include the double-decker A380, and the forthcoming A350 XWB, is geared up to challenge the Boeing Dreamliner.

The Dreamliner is touted as the most energy-efficient aircraft ever and Boeing has an order backlog of 37 Dreamliners to be delivered to Air India and Jet Airways, according to Dinesh Keskar, president, Boeing India.

While these two aviation giants go nose to nose, what's surprising is that both have outsourced many aspects of their their pet projects to the same vendor, QuEST Global, a Bangalore-based engineering company. QuEST is currently working on both the upcoming Boeing Dreamliner and Airbus A350 XWB.

Small Indian companies have been rapidly going up the value chain in aerospace for the last couple of years. Public sector units such as HAL, National Aeronautics Laboratory (NAL) and others, for the first time,

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invited private sector participation in design and engineering activities.

Previously, these activities were largely done in-house—only manufacturing of components and subsystems was outsourced. Now, the complete system design is being outsourced, points out Prof HS Jamadagni, who has worked on such technologies at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

Parts for the landing gear and other components made at QuEST's facility at Krishnarajapuram are now integral parts of several Airbus and Boeing models, earning it Rs 400 crore in revenues last year, despite the battering the airline sector took from rising fuel prices and costs as well as the economic slowdown. QuEST Global has a manufacturing facility in Bangalore, that does precision machining.

"We also have an SEZ in Belgaum, where we have expanded our manufacturing to include additional precision machining capabilities, sheet metal work, and aerospace special processing (through a JV with Magellan Aerospace)," says Bejoy George, chief marketing officer. Walking through the facility, one can see equipment for landing gears, the nose and casing for the main engines being built.

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