



Gallery: M S Rajamurthy

## Speed was the essence of his life

**M S Rajamurthy's tribute to Rustom Behram Damania**



Prof Rustom Behram Damania (known to most of us as Prof Damania and to many as RBD), the man with the great passion for flying machines, an engineer to the core and a designer, is no more.

Most of us from the Department of Aerospace Engineering, Indian Institute of Science have enjoyed the flight experience in the Pushpak (VT-DWA) with Damania at the controls. About Rustom taking his students on his motorbike to Jakkur for the flying experience the story goes that the flight *to* Jakkur was more thrilling than the flight *at* Jakkur!

I too had my share of thrills with Damania on the VT-DWA. In the mid-70's, he and Wg Cdr Nallayya taught me, Dr S Balakrishna and Dr G R Sarma how to fly an aircraft. I still have the weather report collected at the HAL Airport during my cross-country flight to Mysore with Damania. At Mysore, as he asked me to land, Damania in his inimitable style told me: "Rajamurthy, the whole airfield is yours! But be careful".

This attitude epitomized Rustom Damania: he was adventurous but at the same time cautious. I vividly remember the day when we were not cleared for quite some time by the ATC to leave IISc to reach HAL Airport (VT-DWA was stationed at HAL those days). Impatient Rustom, after checking on the communication set that the Bombay flight had landed, took off with me and we virtually sideslipped all the way to the HAL Airport in the crosswinds!

My second phase of close collaboration with RBD was ten years later, in the mid-80's, when he started building the Rutan Long-Ez ("LCRA") aircraft at NAL. Being the only aeronautical engineer in the Systems Division Division, I was put under him for this programme as soon as I returned from Germany. It was an intense period of learning and doing. Mr D V Bakshi and his team joined us and ably fabricated the LCRA.



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I still remember those LCRA fabrication days vividly. Damania's untiring spirit and zeal to build a flying machine was unmatched. Such was his passion that he would not think twice about shuttling from NAL to HAL to Jakkur to City Market all in one day on his reliable motorbike. Especially memorable were those drives across the runway to HAL whenever we needed something from HAL. Most normal beings went to HAL by public roads, but Rustom was different! He was always in a hurry.

The LCRA was built, flown and went on to become the bedrock for small aircraft development at NAL.

Damania had a grand plan for flight research activity at NAL and even thought of using the LCRA for aerial photography and remote sensing. Damania loved Rutan's design from the beginning and this love endured till his last days, when he was involved in some special studies on LCRA's flying performance. Even earlier, Damania had offered to use Rutan's approach to build and test fly an 80% LCA derivative to generate flight data.

As a person, Prof Damania was very warm and straightforward. He loved driving and flying -- especially three-wheelers! The LCRA was, of course, a flying machine with three wheels, but Damania also drove a private auto rickshaw at one time. This auto rickshaw often brought him trouble, including a brief visit to the Commercial Street Police Station when his private vehicle was confused for a public carrier.

The pilot in Rustom was all-prevalent; and speed was the essence of his life. This magnificent man and his flying machines will forever be a part of NAL and India's aviation history.

*M S Rajamurthy*

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