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target event](#)13 [Soumya Sw
WHO Chief!](#)

BENGALURU

How this small group of women at NAL has been critical to the Saras programme



STAFF REPORTER

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Some of the scientists who work on the Saras programme. | Photo Credit: Sudhakara Jain / The Hindu

Nearly 10 years after a crash seemed to have ended the Saras dream, the turbo-prop plane soared over the crowds at Aero India. The sorties of the 14-seater twin-engine propeller aircraft were perhaps overshadowed by the roar of jet fighters. But for the women of National Aerospace Laboratory (NAL), the anticipation was thick, and their pride soared higher with each sortie.

“Saras is like our second child,” says Manju Nanda, Principal Senior Scientist, Aerospace Software and Information Systems Division (ASISD), NAL.

Following the crash, when funding for the project stopped in 2013, the scientists felt a sense of betrayal.

“We have seen each and every component being developed, every hurdle being crossed. After the crash, we were angry. We did not avail the passes for the aero show... but our passion remained, and now it has risen from the ashes,” says Akshatha H.T., a senior scientist at NAL’s Centre for Civil Aircraft Design and Development who was part of the team that designed the structure of the plane.

The small group of women – as per their estimates, women form just 17% of NAL’s staff – has been critical to the Saras programme. Among them are J. Jayanthi, Chief Scientist, ASISD, and Dr. Nanda who led the team that developed India’s first Stall Warning System software that has been approved for use in aircraft. Lakshmi Devi, Senior Scientist, C-CADD, plays an important role in the team that looks after the electrical systems and their indigenisation while Sivasakthi M., who has worked her way up from a trainee intern to a scientist, is a part of the flight test instrumentation team that keeps an eye on telemetry.

Ms. Jayanthi was among five girls in the B.Tech course in Madras Institute of Technology. By 1989, she was at NAL when there were less than 10 women scientists in the two divisions she was associated with. “More women have joined since then. NAL and other defense PSUs give equal opportunity for women, but the society’s mindset is such that women do not apply in the numbers we desire,” she said.

Over the years, though more women have completed engineering, it is still the private sector that beckons. The prevalent mindset is that aviation is a place suited for men. But, the women at NAL are determined to change that, whether it is an electrical technician who hauls 200kg batteries, or Sivashakti M. who has to climb 20 feet to check tracking antenna as part of her job.

Women in defence

By rough estimates, women now constitute 24% of the armed forces and defence PSUs. However, this is not evenly spread out, with women having lower representation as pilots or technicians.

The International Women’s Pilots Association, which has over 1,000 members across the country, had opened a Bengaluru chapter last week. The chapter is headed by Tessy Thomas, Director General of Aeronautical Systems at Defence Research and Development Organisation, and the first woman to head a missile programme in India.

“In the coming weeks and months, there will be more collaboration with women professionals from DRDO. We want to highlight opportunities not just as pilots, but as mechanical engineers, flight safety officers and the technical side of aviation,” Harpreet A. De. Singh, President of IWPA had told *The Hindu* during Aero India 2019.



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