

Jet-powered aircraft and cars with stats to rival F1 machines are only part of the attraction of RC modelling. Throw in build sessions, sprightly boys' days out and increasing affordability, and you know why the hobby is hot right now. By **Nikita Bastian**



I trained to be an engineer and have always wanted to be a pilot. RC modelling gives me the best of both worlds. There's nothing like the kick you get out of flying a machine you've built yourself. Sometimes I feel there's never enough money or time I can spend on the hobby! It is the prefect productive pastime

— Madhavan, actor



RADIO ACTIVITY



ITH 70 hours a week on average spent on RC (remote control) modelling, cinematographer K Aravind admits his primary profession is suffering. "I've not made a film in four years!" he laughs. Aravind's is not an isolated case. Be it film stars Ajith and Madhavan, corporates, top brass from the armed forces or engineering students, most people just can't seem to get enough of the radio-controlled hobby. A case in point would be Ajo Joseph, sales head, Frost & Sullivan and RC car addict. "I've been into cars ever since I walked into my family's auto workshop as a kid and that passion has led me to RC modelling," says Joseph, his long-standing love affair with all things automotive being echoed by fellow enthusiasts, Amardeep Devadason, a senior leader at a BPO who loves his boats, and ex-army man, captain Manish Chandrayan, the aircraft guy. Who can blame them, when the hobby boasts of aircraft that hit speeds of 350 kmph (remember the flurry of planes in the Ben Affleck-starrer, *Pearl Harbor*? They were mostly RC models) and power-packed miniature monster trucks that weigh in at a whopping 12 kilos.

Indulging in his passion, Aravind opened Rotor Sport & Hobby, the city's first and only RC store, about two years ago. Located in Ashok Nagar, the store retails — virtually, as well — radio-controlled cars, boats, planes and helicopters. To mark its second anniversary this September, it will be organising (in association with the Radio Control Pilots' Association (RCPA), a Chennai-based trust founded by Aravind and actor Ajith) a jambo-

ree that brings together RC modelling enthusiasts from across India and Southeast Asia. "In 2000, I developed an interest in RC helicopters, but back then, these models were non-existent in India. So, I went to the US to learn how to handle these machines before opening my store," explains Aravind. "The interest the store generates is encouraging. We have engineering colleges inviting us to put up airshows and wing commanders from the IAF base in Tambaram asking us to train their cadets in the hobby," he declares.

Incidentally, it's not just the upper echelons of society that monopolise RC modelling. "You find a lot of students interested in RC modelling these days, and this has a lot to do with the hobby becoming less expensive," says captain Chandrayan. "Back in the late '80s, when I built my first model, there was just one RC model company in India, Aurora Model Manufacturing in Kolkata, that retailed US, European or Japanese-made equipment. Today, about 60 to 70 per cent of RC equipment is made in China, cutting costs by more than half," he elucidates.

Know your 'sport'

Still in its infancy in the country, RC modelling is more of a sport than a hobby, feels Devadason. "You have to be very disciplined. It takes about 45 days to build a model, and if I'm heading out to the track on a Sunday morning, I have to spend all Saturday preparing my vehicle and all Sunday evening cleaning it. While handling it, you have to remember it is not a toy but a scale replica of the real life vehicle, so the same rules of propriety apply," he cautions. "If you take things too lightly, people could get hurt. Furthermore, if you crash your model, there's no reset button like in a video game — you've got to rebuild your ride," adds Aravind.

Get in the race

Rotor Sport & Hobby appears to be the glue that holds Chennai's RC community together, being frequented by hobby addicts and first-timers alike. "Rotor Sports is not just about retail. We have customers from as far away as Nainital and Gangtok and we provide them with technical support too — including helping them build, tune and repair models, and offering handling training that is of critical importance. We stock spares and accessories too," says Aravind. Chennai also boasts of one of only two professional aeromodelling tracks in the country — the other being in Hyderabad. Launched late last year, 100 kms south of the city (on NH-45), the Alpha 3 airfield at Achara-pakkam is the brainchild of the RCPA and meets Academy of Model Aeronautics (the world's largest model aviation association based in the US) regulations. "We don't have a professional track for cars yet — the closest track is at Bangalore — but we are building



one and setting up a lake course for RC boats too at the RCPA track site," offers Aravind. Since there are no decent still water bodies for boats, enthusiasts head to Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. Also on the verge of being launched by Aravind and Co is a RC helicopter-mounted camera, which the cinematographer promises will be a 'fantastic tool for filmmakers.'

A day in the life...

"There's no set agenda, but most of us head out to the Alpha 3 track — an alternative is the Sholavaram airfield — every Sunday morning and are back home by the afternoon. On an average day you'd find about seven to 10 guys mucking around with automobiles, and about

15 to 20 with flying machines. These get-togethers also give us a chance to discuss the hobby, troubleshoot and catch up on the latest models and hottest trends doing the rounds," Joseph maintains. "You'll find a lot of good-humoured banter and friendly rivalry around... oh you've got that model, is it? Look at what I've built this month!" laughs Devadason. Besides, you need your buddies at the track, all our modellers agree. "You need someone to keep you posted on whether the runway is clear, the wind direction and other technical things," admits Aravind. "When something goes wrong and your vehicle crashes, everyone rallies around, helping retrieve the vehicle and offering re-building advice," adds Devadason.

Where have all the women gone?

So what do the WAGS have to say about all this male bonding? "Of course the ladies can get a little annoyed with the men heading out every weekend, so we take them along," chuckles Aravind, while Devadason adds, "You'll find my fiancé in the pits helping me refuel." Talking about the girls, are there any into the hobby? "I'm not sure why, but I've not met a woman modeller — and I'm not talking just India here, even abroad, there are just a handful. At the most, this becomes a project for a girl who's doing an engineering course, but not a recreational activity. And I find that strange, because women would beat men hands down when it comes to building models, considering how much more meticulous they are!" declares captain Chandrayan. Take the hint, sister!

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RC Fun Fly Jamboree 2010

Scheduled for September 11 and 12 at the Alpha 3 airfield, the RC Fun Fly Jamboree 2010 will be the first of its kind in Chennai (in fact, Amby Valley is the only other venue for such events in India). On the roster will be car races and other showcase events, featuring all categories of RC vehicles, with enthusiasts coming in from Singapore and Indonesia too. Details: www.rotorsport.in

Make your choice



LAND VEHICLES: Includes cars, buggies, monster trucks and truggies (a truck-buggy combo). Start off with brand Thunder Tiger, then upgrade to HPI, Traxxas or Team Associated (top-end racing cars). Electric cars are fast, eco-friendly options, while nitro (a special fuel blend) cars offer great realism. Petrol cars are the largest of the lot, going up to 1/5 the size of a real car. As for power, nitro cars can have a power to weight ratio of 35,000 RPM (the average F1 car's RPM stands at 17,000... you get the picture). Prices begin at about Rs 15,000.



FLYING MACHINES: Helicopters are probably the hardest RC models to handle, since they operate on three axes. As for planes, options include nitro, electrical, control line and turbine jet engines, which offer speeds of up to 350 kmph! Brands: Great Planes, Hanger 9. With a good instructor, you could be flying solo in four to five days. Prices begin at about Rs 5,000.



BOATS: A still water body is needed. Keeping the boat from flipping when it hits cross currents is quite tough. There are nitro, electric and sailboats, with speeds going up to 65 kmph approximately. Feeling particularly adventurous? Go in for a submarine. **BRANDS:** Kyosho, Tamiya. Prices begin at about Rs 6,000.

Building vs handling

There are two aspects to RC modelling — building the vehicle and then handling it. But, some people just don't have enough time to go the whole hog these days. "That's where Rotor Sport & Hobby comes in. We can partly or completely build your model for you," says Aravind.