

## B. R. Somashekar (1938–2011)

Most lists of India's top 20 contributors to aerospace R&D would contain the name of B. R. Somashekar. Somashekar joined the National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL; called National Aeronautical Laboratory those days) in August 1962, and stayed connected with the Indian aerospace community for almost half a century, till he passed away on 18 May 2011 at the age of 73.

During his 35 years at NAL, Somashekar's career went through that normal tortuous course, where you move from 'Scientist B' to 'Scientist H'. And yet it would be hard to think of Somashekar as a classical 'scientist' – although he did excellent experimental work in aircraft structures in his early years. His true *métier* was as a 'science or R&D manager'.

As a science manager, Somashekar was exceptional. He was just 35 when S. R. Valluri asked him to head NAL's Structures Division. It was an inspired choice, but also rather controversial. Somashekar was considered too young (he must have superseded more worthy seniors) and, at that point of time, he still did not have the hallowed Ph D degree (why is this degree so sacrosanct in Indian R&D establishments?).

Ironically, this failing made Somashekar an even better manager because he had all the time and energy needed to push his division's R&D programmes forward (most scientists like to pretend that their laboratory experiments are more important than their leadership role, when the exact opposite might be the case). To just mention two initiatives, NAL did some wonderful work on the finite element method (it helped that Gangan Prathap was around, and in his best form) and firmly established itself as the 'go-to' place for the design and development of composite aircraft structures (with M. Subba Rao providing outstanding leadership).

Indeed one of Somashekar's great strengths was his ability to mentor his best scientists and leave them free to get on with their work – while he managed those irksome purchase files, those

awkward audit queries, and those recalcitrant section officers (and with immense charm, one might add). With Somashekar as Head, Structures Division was also never short of funds and projects (back in the 1980s and early 1990s, it required a special ability, and some cunning, to channel scarce funds your way). For example, within months of the establishment of the Aeronautical Development



Agency (ADA) in 1984, Somashekar ensured that about Rs 1.5 crores flowed from ADA to NAL to establish an advanced composites development centre. This centre would later develop several air-worthy composite parts for India's light combat aircraft.

Somashekar's other great skill was in what we today call 'networking'. He knew every actor in the Indian aerospace arena, and enjoyed a warm relationship with most of them. These connections enabled him to champion the creation of many vital national aerospace facilities at NAL, including facilities for in-flight vibration testing and aeroelastic model testing. He was also India's Science Counsellor in Germany during 1988–1991; and it can not be a co-incidence that these were the years of the most fruitful Indo-German cooperation in aerospace R&D. Sadly, during Somashekar's heyday, networking was not the exalted skill it is considered today, and he never

received the respect he deserved for steering so many R&D projects NAL's way.

Somashekar would have loved to become NAL's Director – and might have done a very good job too – but that responsibility never came his way. Instead, he cheerfully accepted the vice-captain's position and proved to be a very capable understudy to NAL Directors, K. N. Raju and T. S. Prahlad. Somashekar probably wielded even greater influence outside NAL, and served for many years on advisory committees of many HAL, AR&DB, DRDO and ISRO establishments. After retiring, Somashekar led NAL's technology marketing vehicle NALTech for a decade with dedication and distinction.

Somashekar was an imposing figure and immensely popular, especially among NAL's non-scientific teams. NAL's directors tapped into this popularity and frequently requested him to intervene in those delicate situations where one small lapse can lead to a big and unhappy conflagration. He was always picked to be the Chairman of committees tasked to do jobs and projects that were difficult, tedious or dreadful; e.g. achieve ISO 9001 certification or receive a volatile parliamentary committee that insisted that all wind tunnel activity must cease till its safety procedures are translated into Hindi.

Surprisingly, Somashekar negotiated these tasks with charm, and even aplomb, without ever complaining or refusing. He dearly loved NAL and never considered helping NAL a burden or a chore. 'This is where I spent my entire professional life, this is where I want to be,' he told me when we met a year ago and I asked him if it was not time to cool off. Except for his recent illness, and his bypass surgery some 20 years ago, Somashekar was always fit and eager. His departure was unexpected and painful.

SRINIVAS BHOGLE

539 HMT Layout,  
R.T. Nagar,  
Bangalore 560 032, India  
e-mail: bhogle@gmail.com