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Tejas: 20 years of searing the skies

IAF's indigenous project was sanctioned in 80s and took wings 20 years later

An important date in the history of Indian aviation almost went unnoticed, barring a couple of mentions on social media. On January 4, 2001, Wing Commander Rajiv Kothiyal took the maiden flight of India's fighter jet Light Combat Aircraft (LCA).

This was the first time an indigenous fighter aircraft took to the skies and the flight duration lasted for 18 minutes.

Tejas was designed by Indian aerospace engineers and scientists, unlike HF-24 Marut designed by German aeronautical engineer Kurt Tank, and often considered as India's first fighter jet. Though the LCA's project was sanctioned in the late 1980s, the aircraft idea met with many roadblocks and two decades later became airborne.

Speaking about the journey in the making, Kota Harinarayana, former project director and widely regarded as the father of the LCA told Bangalore Mirror, "There were criticism and hurdles all along the way and several attempts were made to close down the project. In fact, at every parliamentary session, one or two Members of Parliament would raise questions about the need of the project. The economic downturn in the 1990s, the international sanctions in the aftermath of the nuclear tests; we withstood them all and went on to test fly the aircraft in 2001."

Recalling the maiden flight of the LCA, Harinarayana said that the sortie was unlike any other. "Due to sanctions there was little

support from international partners, the Tejas is powered by the GE engines but during the first flight, there was no representative from GE. The LCA is probably the first project where the engine supplier was unavailable for the first flight," he said.

Harinarayana said that the aviation in the country took off after the maiden flight. "It was a true Atma Nirbhar.Bharat moment for defence and aerospace technology in India. This project also encouraged other defence projects," Harinarayana said.

Since then, the LCA project has come a long way with the fighter jet in July 2016 getting inducted into the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the aircraft getting the Final Operational Clearance (FOC) by the military aviation certifying agencies in 2019. In May, last year, the IAF also inducted the Tejas Mk-1 FOC aircraft.

Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), which is the manufacturing agency for the Tejas, said that it will be able to produce 16 aircraft per year from 2022-23 onwards to match with deliveries against the 83 LCA order.

"It is great news that the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) has completed 20 years of flying since its first flight. I am happy to share that the project is progressing at HAL very well as we now have augmented production capacity of 10 to 12 LCAs per year, with exclusive production facilities in Bangalore. We have also developed partners for the supply of major structural assemblies. A new facility, spread across 35

acres, with a built-up area of over 34,000 square metres (sq. m.), is being made ready for production of structural assemblies of the advanced variant of Tejas - LCA Mk1A. This facility will be in full-fledged operation from FY 2021-22 onwards. The HAL will be able to produce 16 aircraft per year from 2022-23 onwards to match with deliveries against the 83 LCA order,” said R Madhavan, HAL Chairman and Managing Director R Madhavan.