

Air Force likely to get 123 LCA Tejas by 2024-25

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If the present development and capacity enhancement plans go as per schedule, the Indian Air Force will have 123 indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas fighter jets in its fleet by 2024-25. To enable this Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) is in the process of setting up a new assembly line and is also involving the private sector in a big way, said the Chief Managing Director (CMD) of the public sector aerospace major T. Suvarna Raju in a conversation with *The Hindu*.

The IAF has placed orders for 40 jets in two batches of which the first 20 are in the Initial Operational Configuration (IOC) while the remaining 20 are in the Final Operational Configuration (FOC). Last July the IAF for operationalised the first Tejas squadron '45 flying daggers' with three aircraft. Two more aircraft will join the squadron shortly. Last November the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) had given initial clearance for 83 aircraft in the Mk-1A configuration with specific improvements sought by the IAF.

Mr. Raju said that about 45 improvements have been implemented in the 1A and HAL has already floated a tender for the Advanced Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar and Self-Protection Jammer (SPJ).

On the timeline for the development of the 1A, Mr. Raju said that the tender would be opened by March end after which technical evaluation and commercial negotiations would be held. "We will be able to prove it on the 1A by 2018 and start producing by 2019," he observed.

Apart from the development, the induction is also delayed by the low production rate of eight aircraft per year. The government has recently given sanction for setting another assembly to increase production rate to 16 per year. "The IAF will get Mk-1A in 2019 by that time our capacity will also go up to 16 aircraft per year," Mr. Raju added. To increase the production of the aircraft HAL has outsourced major parts of the jet. "We are trying to be an integrator rather than a manufacturer, he said. The IAF is in urgent need of new fighters and the LCAs will replace the Mig fighters that are currently being phased out. IAF is scheduled to phase out all 11 squadrons of Mig-21 and Mig-27 fighters by 2024 on completion of their technical life.

On the issue of spares and supports which has been an area of constant concern from the services, Mr. Raju said they have now signed long term supply contracts with their vendors and stated that the availability of all platforms manufactured by HAL has now gone "above 65 percent."