

## **Fight of the phoenix**

Amidst reports that the Indian Air Force (IAF) is looking to dump Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas and instead opt for single engine fighter jets, the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has scaled up production to manufacture more aircraft at its Bangalore Complex.

The defence PSU which has an order to manufacture 83 Tejas MK -1A aircraft has scaled up the production to manufacture 15 aircrafts annually from the earlier eight aircrafts at the Bangalore Complex. It has also set up a second assembly line to meet the target.

"We are on schedule to meet the order to manufacture 83 Tejas MK -1A aircraft and have already started to speed up the production of the aircrafts from 8 to 15 per year. A second assembly line has already been set up for this where the existing Hawk trainer aircraft hangars would be used for the Tejas' production," an HAL official told Bangalore Mirror.

The official added that HAL has already manufactured and delivered the Hawk aircraft to the IAF and the Indian Navy.

The PSU had a total order of 123 Hawks from the IAF and Indian Navy in addition to 22 aircraft for the Surya Kiran aerobatic team.

The LCA project is one of the most delayed indigenous defence projects with the Ministry of Defence initiating the project way back 1980s to replace the ageing MiG-21s.

However, Tejas has been delayed for several years and, only in July 2016, was it inducted in the IAF.

Only five aircrafts have been inducted into the IAF's No 45 Squadron so far and the

LCA has only attained the Initial Operational Clearance (IOC).

The IOC aircraft are armed with Close Combat Air-to-Air Missiles, Helmet Mounted Displays and Precision Guided Weapons like Laser Guided Bombs. These aircraft are also capable of dropping unguided bombs with much higher accuracy due to highly advanced indigenous mission computer.

The LCA is yet to get Final Operational Clearance (FOC). The FOC aircraft would incorporate Beyond Visual Range (BVR) missiles, improved and better stand-off weapons and air to air refuelling capability. IAF is also pitching for additional LCA Mk 1A which would incorporate new generation Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) Radar with simultaneous air-to-air and air-to-ground capability, an integrated advanced Electronic Warfare Suite, advanced versions of air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons and maintainability improvements.

HAL said that the FOC is planned only by the end of 2018.

An HAL official said that the PSU, which also operated the HAL airport where 45 Squadron is based out of, has been provided with a new tarmac for carrying out day and night operations and further enhance the capabilities of the aircraft before it attains FOC.

Meanwhile, the IAF is said to soon issue a Request for Information (RFI) for acquiring 114 fighter jets. The IAF is said to prefer these jets instead of the advanced version of the Tejas due to its limited capabilities.