

## Tejas is better than MiG, it's the best: Pilot

Chethan Kumar



Bangalore: There's a long way to go before my boys can touch it," the then Air Chief Marshal PV Naik had said on January 10, 2011, the day India's Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas got its first initial operational clearance (IOC-1).

It had spoilt the party for Team Tejas, prompting a second IOC. But if the experience of National Flight Testing Centre (NFTC) pilots is any measure, Air Chief Marshal NAK Browne shouldn't have problems with his boys taking India's pride to the skies.

"Kick the tyre and burn the fire. It's ready," one of them said a day before IOC-2 is scheduled here. Group Captain Suneeth Krishna, who has been involved with the aircraft since its first flight on January 2001, said: "It is a pilot's aircraft."

Krishna had flown a Mirage trailing the LCA when it took off for the first time over 12 years ago with Wing Commander (retd) Rajiv Kothiyal at the controls.

Today, the aircraft is different. Compared to two years ago, the angle of attack has been increased to 24 degrees from 17, it has been integrated with a basic electronic warfare suite,

**TOUGH JOB:** Pilot interface is amazing in Tejas, says Group Captain Suneeth Krishna (left), who has been involved with the aircraft project since its first flight on January 2001

has lesser maintenance issues, more weapons and comes with an enhanced flight envelop.

"I remember the first flight vividly. Wing Co Kothiyal and I took off together. And to see that white craft lift off was a moment of unrivalled pride. It was ours and it was flying. Today, I'm proud because it has evolved," he said. Like most IAF pilots of his time, his heart is with the MiG. "A MiG is a MiG, our first aircraft. We used to call it the Ferrari," he says. MiG-21 FL was decommissioned last week.

So what's the LCA? "It's better than the Ferrari," he says. "It has an inherent advantage. We have the design, so we can alter it to our needs. Also, inputs from flying the MiG, Mirage and Sukhoi have been used in designing the cockpit. I can say it's the best. The pilot interface is amazing," he said.

Krishna has the maximum number of flying hours on the Tejas. His colleague, Group Captain Venugopal, said: "There were a few upgrades the IAF wanted two years ago. We've achieved them now, and the aircraft is ready to be handed over."

He said the LCA is an ongoing programme. "We've achieved certain targets and have some before the final operational clearance (FOC). Even after that, we can keep improving it," he said.