

Interview with CB Ananthakrishnan, CMD, HAL



Aircraft maker Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has found itself in the spotlight after the Indian Air Force (IAF) announced plans to buy more fighter jets, light combat helicopters, and to upgrade its Sukhoi Su-30MKIs in potential contracts worth billions of dollars. HAL is also set to begin work on jointly designing and developing helicopter engines with French firm Safran, and is negotiating a deal for the joint production of

fighter jet engines in the country with GE Aerospace. In an interview with Rahul Singh from The Hindustan Times, HAL chief outlined how the state-run firm is ramping up capacities, preparing to execute the big orders and projects, and pushing indigenisation along the way.

HAL has been on a roll. How prepared are you for the journey ahead?

We anticipated these projects and began laying the groundwork two to three years ago. The primary thing was capacity planning. The capacities we have created, and are creating, will become national assets for future programmes. We are confident of delivering on time. Apart from platforms like fighters and helicopters, we are also creating additional capacity for engines, avionics and accessories. There has been a paradigm shift in HAL's approach. We no longer wait to start work after an order or sanction comes, be it design or manufacturing activity. The moment we see the demand for a particular product, HAL ploughs its own money into these activities so that time is not lost. Today we ensure we have a head start even before a contract is signed. The potential orders for more light combat aircraft (LCA) Mk.1A and light combat helicopters (LCH) reflect the customer's confidence in us, in our ability to deliver higher numbers and handle tight timelines. We have enough capacity to execute current and future orders.

What is the status of the joint venture to design and develop helicopter engines with Safran?

The JV will become operational in January 2024, and production of engines is expected to begin in four years. These engines will be for the Indian multi-role helicopter (IMRH) and its deck-based version. There is a requirement for around 400 such helicopters. We are looking at basing the Safran-HAL JV at our new Tumakuru facility, which is the largest helicopter manufacturing facility in the country. We can manufacture up to 90 helicopters in Tumakuru every year, a mix of LCH, light utility helicopters and

IMRH. With the JV based there, Tumakuru will become one big complex for helicopters and associated equipment. Safran and HAL will have a 50:50 work-share. IMRH could go into production with the new engine by 2031. The timelines are tight, but the good part is that we are already manufacturing the Shakti engine for the advanced light helicopter with technology transfer from Safran.

HAL has ramped up LCA Mk.1A production capacity to 24 aircraft per year. Is there more scope to scale up?

Our current goal is to deliver 24 aircraft from the Bengaluru and Nashik facilities from 2025-26. Once we



have reached that goal, we can ramp up production to 30 aircraft per annum. It is possible if we can streamline the supply chain. But first we have to prove we can deliver 24 as there's a general sense that HAL is not capable of producing aircraft in big numbers. I don't want to get into that debate. More numbers are achievable as we know what our capacities and capabilities are. We are focussed on making more numbers available to our customers as soon as possible.

