

IAF's No. 3 Squadron prepares for bittersweet farewell to MiG-21



MiG-21 flying operations are in full swing at the sprawling Nal desert fighter base, with the Indian Air Force (IAF) exploiting the full potential of the last of its Soviet era interceptors before bringing the curtain down later this year on the iconic fleet that has served India for six decades as it moves on to the locally produced light combat aircraft (LCA) with several accidents calling into question the safety of the MiG.

IAF chief Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari announced on 3 October 2023 that the MiG-21 was being phased out, and the process is likely to be completed by 2025. In October end, IAF retired the MiG-21s of the No.4 Squadron based at Uttarlai in Rajasthan.

The MiG-21, India's first supersonic fighter whose induction began in 1963, has still not run out of juice, can hold its own in combat, and the fighter's handling is as good as any other's in the air force's combat fleet, said Group Captain Chetan Sharma, the commanding officer of IAF's No.3 Squadron, better known as "Cobras". "The aircraft

will be pulled out of service by 2025 but it's business as usual for us. The venerable steed has held its own for 60 years," he stated.

The Cobras are among the last generation of MiG-21 pilots in the country; the No.3 is one of the only two remaining MiG-21 squadrons. The other one, No.23 or "Panthers", is based 185km north at Suratgarh, also in Rajasthan. The exact phasing out schedule is still being worked out. A squadron consists of 16 to 18 fighter jets. Both squadrons operate the MiG-21 Bison, the last variant of the single engine workhorse.



IAF has operated a raft of MiG-21 variants—Type 74 or MiG-21F, Type 76 or MiG-21PF, Type 77 or MiG-21FL, Type 96 or MiG-21M, Type 75 or MiG-21 Bis (upgraded Type 96), and the MiG-21 Bison.

The MiG-21 still allows the pilots to push the flight envelope (the design parameters for aircraft safety)