

As the Indian Air Force marks the 88<sup>th</sup> year of its existence,  
Sankalan Chattopadhyay looks at its



IAF Sukhoi Su-30MKI (Photo: Angad Singh)

# Past, Present and Future

The Indian Air Force was established on 8 October in 1932 in Colonial India as an auxiliary of the Royal Air Force in India. However, a handful of Indian pilots had flown with the Royal Air Force (Royal Flying Corps) 15 years earlier. Hardit Singh Malik was the first Indian pilot in the RFC, who scored six victories against German fighters during World War I followed by SC Welinkar, Errol Sen, Indra Lal Roy, the latter claiming ten aerial victories and posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

Upon its establishment, the Indian Air Force adopted Royal Air Force uniforms, badges, brevets and insignia and on 1 April 1933, commissioned its first squadron, with four Westland Wapiti II biplanes and five Indian pilots. These were Harish Chandra Sircar, Subroto Mukerjee, Bhupendra Singh, Aizad Baksh Awan and Amarjeet Singh. The sixth officer, JN Tandon had to revert to logistics duties as he was too short!

In 1937, the infant air force saw its first combat experience when 'A' Flight was sent to Miranshah in North Waziristan, to support Indian Army operations against Bhattani tribesmen. There was some

expansion in April 1936 with a 'B' Flight formed, also on the vintage Wapiti biplane. It was not until June 1938 that a 'C' Flight was raised which brought No.1 Squadron to full strength, and remained the sole IAF formation when World War II began by which time the personnel strength had increased to 16 officers and 662 men.

During World War II, the air force was expanded, going through a phase of steady growth. New aircraft were added, beginning with Lysanders, then the more warlike Vultee Vengeance, Hawker Hurricane, Supermarine Spitfire and by end of the war in 1945, the IAF had nine squadrons, all of which had taken part in the war against Japan.

In recognition of their services, King George VI conferred the prefix 'Royal' on the IAF and one of its Spitfire squadrons was sent to Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces.

On independence, and partition of the country, the RIAF was reduced to six squadrons of Tempest II fighters plus some Spitfire XIVs and a handful of C-47 Dakota transports. These were flung into action when Pakistan invaded the then princely

state of Jammu and Kashmir, with the operations lasting from October 1947 till December 1948.

The RIAF entered the jet era on 4 November 1948, when three Vampire F.Mk.3 jet fighters arrived in India, to be followed by the Vampire FB Mk.52 which gained the RIAF distinction of becoming the first Asian air arm to operate jets. Transformation of the RIAF in the jet era was consolidated under AVM Subroto Mukherjee, who on 1 April 1954 became an Air Marshal and the first Indian Chief of the Air Staff.

After India became a Republic in 1950, the air force dropped the 'Royal' prefix. In the early to mid-1950s, the IAF underwent massive transformation and expansion inducting large numbers of HAL-built Vampire FB Mk.52s, then French-origin Ouragans and Mysteres IVAs, followed by British-origin Hunter F.56s, Canberra bombers and strategic reconnaissance aircraft and soon after, the Gnat light fighter which was built in quantity by HAL.

The only heavy bomber type the IAF operated were the refurbished (by HAL) B-24J Liberators which served the IAF