

India to Unleash Ghatak Stealth UCAV, Tejas Mk2 in 2026 for IAF's Manned-Unmanned Teaming



India's indigenous aerospace and defense sector is poised for a transformative year in 2026, with plans to roll out two of its most advanced aerial platforms: the Ghatak stealth combat drone and the Tejas Mk2 fighter jet. This parallel timeline, confirmed by the Aeronautical Development Establishment (ADE), signals a major shift for the Indian Air Force (IAF), paving the way for a new combat doctrine integrating manned and unmanned aircraft. This strategic move aims to equip the IAF with a powerful combination for precision strikes, autonomous surveillance, and complex, high-stakes air combat.

At the forefront of this technological leap is the Ghatak, an advanced Remotely Piloted Strike Aircraft (RPSA). Developed as India's premier Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV), the Ghatak is a 13-ton aircraft featuring a "flying-wing" design. This specific shape, combined with specialized materials, ensures a very low radar cross-section, making it exceptionally difficult for enemy air defense systems to detect. The drone is engineered for critical missions such as deep-penetration strikes into hostile territory and the suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD). It will be powered by a non-afterburning version of the Dry Kaveri engine, developed domestically by the Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE). With an internal fuel capacity of 3.7 tons, the Ghatak is expected to boast a combat radius exceeding 1,000 kilometers and can remain airborne for 5 to 8 hours. Its internal weapons bay can carry 1.5 tons of precision-guided bombs and missiles, potentially including the BrahMos-NG.

Development of the Ghatak is progressing steadily. Following successful design reviews, private-sector giant Larsen & Toubro (L&T) has commenced fabricating the prototype's airframe.

The Dry Kaveri engine has also successfully passed crucial high-altitude tests in Russia, with flight trials scheduled for late 2025. The IAF has expressed its intent to acquire at least 150 Ghatak UCAVs, positioning them as a key component of its future combat strategy.

Complementing the Ghatak is the Tejas Mk2, a 4.5-generation multirole fighter jet, which is also set for its first flight in early 2026. This indigenous fighter will feature an advanced avionics suite, led by the Uttam Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar. This powerful Gallium Nitride (GaN)-based radar can track multiple targets at ranges exceeding 150 kilometers and is scheduled to enter production in 2025.

The simultaneous introduction of the Ghatak and Tejas Mk2 is set to revolutionize the IAF's operational philosophy through Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T). Under this doctrine, a Ghatak drone could function as a "loyal wingman" controlled by a pilot in a Tejas Mk2 or other advanced fighter. This allows the unmanned Ghatak to be dispatched ahead into heavily defended areas for reconnaissance, target engagement, or to draw enemy fire, significantly enhancing the effectiveness and survivability of the manned aircraft. This combination will provide the IAF with a layered strike capability, utilizing the stealthy Ghatak for high-risk initial strikes and the versatile Tejas Mk2 for a broad spectrum of multirole missions. As 2026 approaches, the successful rollout of these two platforms will not only bolster India's military deterrence but also solidify its position among a select group of nations capable of developing and deploying advanced, homegrown air power solutions for the modern battlefield.