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Saturday, July 30, 2022

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Another MiG-21 crash: India's fleet, past accidents, and future phase-out

There have been six MiG-21 Bison crashes in the last two 20 months, with five crashes in 2021 and one in 2022. Five pilots have lost their lives in these crashes. However, this is the first fatal trainer aircraft crash of the MiG-21 Bison in a long time.

Written by [Man Aman Singh Chhina](#), Edited by Explained Desk | Chandigarh |

Updated: July 30, 2022 8:17:56 am



The MiG-21 Bison is an upgraded version of the MiG-21bis which had been first inducted into service in

A MiG-21 Bison aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF) **crashed in Barmer, Rajasthan, on Thursday night (July 28), killing the two pilots aboard the trainer version of the fighter aircraft.** A look at India's MiG-21 Bison fleet, the vintage of these aircraft, and the future of their service.

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What is known about the cause of the MiG-21 crash?

As per information released by the IAF, this was a trainer version of the fighter aircraft with two pilots on board. As is the norm for training missions, there was one senior pilot, Wing Commander M Rana, on board along with a junior pilot, Flight Lieutenant Adivitya Bal. The typical mission in such sorties is to impart operational training to the junior pilots and also to test their skills in a constant effort to keep their skills and knowledge up to date and to suggest improvements if any.

The reasons behind the crash are still not known and a Court of Inquiry will look into it. In the past, Technical Defects, Human Error (Aircrew) and bird hits have been causes of some of the fighter aircraft accidents in IAF. Spatial disorientation during night sorties too can happen, but IAF pilots are trained to overcome such disorientations.

Indian Air Force  @IAF_MCC · Jul 28, 2022 

At 9:10 pm this evening, an IAF MiG 21 trainer aircraft met with an accident in the western sector during a training sortie. Both pilots sustained fatal injuries.

Indian Air Force 
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IAF deeply regrets the loss of lives and stands firmly with the bereaved families.

A Court of Inquiry has been ordered to ascertain the cause of the accident

10:51 PM · Jul 28, 2022 

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How many MiG-21 aircraft have crashed recently?

There have been six MiG-21 Bison crashes in the last two 20 months, with five crashes in 2021 and one in 2022. Five pilots have lost their lives in these crashes. However, this is the first fatal trainer aircraft crash of the MiG-21 Bison in a long time.

How many MiG-21 Bison aircraft are in IAF?

There are four squadrons of MiG-21 Bison aircraft currently in service in the IAF with each squadron comprising 16-18 aircraft, including two trainer versions. Out of these one squadron, Srinagar-based No 51 Squadron, is going to be retired from service or 'number plated' in IAF jargon on September 30 this year, leaving three squadrons in service. Out of these three squadrons, one will be number plated each year and, thus, MiG-21 Bison will be phased out of IAF by 2025. The IAF is looking towards reviving these squadrons back into service with the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas.

How old is the MiG-21 Bison as compared to other versions?

The MiG-21 Bison is an upgraded version of the MiG-21bis which had been first inducted into service in 1976. The MiG-21 FL, which was an older version of the aircraft and which joined service in the early 1960s, had been phased out of IAF in 2013.

The IAF received the first upgraded MiG-21 Bison, which had a quantum leap of upgrade of avionics, in 2001 and the last of these upgraded fighters was received in 2008.

It was a Mig-21 Bison flown by Wing Commander (now Group Captain) Abhinandan Varthaman, which had reportedly shot down a F-16 aircraft, a vastly superior aircraft, of the Pakistan Air Force on February 27, 2019.

The Bison version of the MiG-21 has also seen the induction of women fighter pilots in the IAF with Flying Officer Avani Chaturvedi becoming the first woman pilot of the IAF to complete a solo flight on the aircraft in June 2016.

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How did the MiG-21 aircraft get the name of 'Flying Coffin'?

The MiG-21 aircraft, with all its versions, formed the backbone of the fleet of fighter aircraft of the IAF, and the number of crashes that took place in the IAF were the highest in its category. Most of these versions had been licence-produced in India.

There were many inquiries into the crashes amidst allegations of poor safety record of these aircraft with more than 170 pilots having lost their lives in accidents, as per data put out officially by the Defence Ministry in the past. More than 20 aircraft have crashed since 2010 and 38 aircraft crashed between 2003 and 2013 in a period of ten years. The high rate of accidents earned the aircraft the nickname of 'Flying Coffin'.

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What has been the representation of MiG-21 in popular culture?

In September 2001 a MiG-21bis crash in Suratgarh claimed the life of Flight Lieutenant Abhijeet Gadgil soon after take-off. There was a controversy when the pilot's mother, Kavita Gadgil, raised the issue of technical defects in the aircraft and said that her son was being wrongly blamed for the crash. She received a letter from the then Inspector General of Flight Safety of IAF, Air Marshal Ashok Goyal, accusing her of demoralising the IAF with her statements. The then Air Chief, Air

Chief Marshal S P Tyagi, apologised for the tone of the letter and wrote to Kavita Gadgil withdrawing it and absolving her son of any blame.

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The struggle of Kavita Gadgil to highlight safety issues with the MiG-21 aircraft led to the inclusion of her story in the Hindi Movie 'Rang De Basanti', which was released in 2006 and went on to become a blockbuster.

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