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# INDIAN DEFENCE REVIEW

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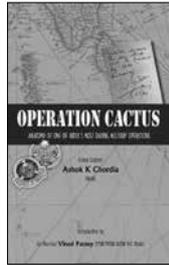
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The military history of India has not attracted the attention of scholars in adequate measures. The trend of studying military history is now gradually picking up. To this, some military officers are also contributing substantially. Recently, a book "Operation Cactus: Anatomy of one of India's Most daring Military Operations", by Ashok K Chordia



## OPERATION CACTUS

Anatomy of one of India's Most daring Military Operations

by **ASHOK K CHORDIA**

KW Publishers, New Delhi

PP 291 • ₹1280

is a useful addition. It is a well-researched work which bears the imprint of an experienced officer. Incidentally, Group Captain Chordia, then a Flight Lieutenant and a Para Jumping Instructor at Paratroopers Training School Agra himself was part of the Maldivian operation.

The book describes Indian intervention in rescuing President Gayoom of Maldives, from a coup attempt thatched by Maldivian businessman Abdullah Luthufee, with some locals and Srilankan Tamil mercenaries (People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam) in support (henceforth rebels). An SOS received by New Delhi at early hours on 3 November 1988 regarding the crisis in Maldives, prompted Indian official machinery to extend help to democratically elected Maldivian President. The lack of information about the rebels, their strength and weapons was a constraint. So was the limitation of time. Sending troops by sea would have delayed timely help and provided opportunity to rebels to overpower the President known to be in hiding and set up their own government. A parachute brigade based at Agra was, therefore asked to take off immediately. The brigade swung into action and within hours boarded the IAF aircrafts for destination Hulule airport, 2,700 kilometres from Agra.

The rescue team initially did not have the military maps and had to depend on a coffee-table book and school atlas on Maldives (p. 69). Further, there was no reliable information whether Hulule airport had passed on to rebels. In the circumstances, para dropping of troops was the only option left. But it could also prove hazardous due to small size of airport area and its proximity to the sea. The high coastal winds could push the parachutists into the sea, leaving hardly any chance of survival. The military leaders on board however decided to land the aircraft. Immediately after deplaning, the paratroopers sprinkled all around the airport and some crossed the lagoon (between Hulule and Male) to take on the mercenaries in Male. President Gayoom was brought out from hidings and restored to his office.

Rebels realising the might of Indian forces, escaped in a merchant vessel taking some Maldivian VIPs as hostages. Indian Navy, however tracked down the vessel and captured them all. The hostages were released and those injured were shifted to military hospital Trivandrum. The rebels were handed over to the authorities at Male.

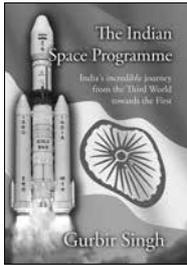
The book under review is organised in thirteen chapters broadly covering in three main parts. An 'Introduction' by Air Marshal Vinod Patney admires the author for his seminal

study. The author's 'Preface' explains the methodology adopted in writing the narrative and his 'Prologue' describes some incidents and events. The first part of the book entitled 'A Besieged President' comprises four chapters- first two deal with history and geography of Maldives and next two flashbacks to the past in order to give a feel of time preceding operations. The second part entitled 'Operation Cactus' comprises five chapters. The author shines brightest here. It narrates the decision making at highest level and planning and execution of operation at unit level. It also describes mobilisation of para units and air force squadrons. The narrative also covers the action of the Task Force, rendezvous with the President Gayoom and final blow to the rebels. The third and the final part entitled 'Comprehending Cactus' comprises four chapters detailing analysis of the operation and nuances of paratrooping. In this part of the book, the author highlights the mutual trust between diplomatic corps and military commanders, and synergy among the three Services in successful execution of the Operation. This part also describes similarities of 'Operation Cactus' with some other operations like 'Eiche', 'Thunderbolt', etc. The book closes with an 'Epilogue' with five leaflets in the end. In the Epilogue, the author bemoans the lack of recognition to this successful military operation.

In writing this book, Group Captain Chordia has carried extensive research. He has consulted available all primary sources, including unit histories and squadron diaries and interviewed almost all key players of the operation. The range of material available in secondary sources like journals, books, internet, etc. are also used. The narrative is easy to comprehend and engaging. He has gone in the depth of the subject and explored almost all possible dimensions related to the subject. The book clearly brings out that it was truly a tri-service operation in which Air Force air-lifted the Task Force, Army rescued the President and restored law and order while Navy nabbed the rebels, handing them over to Maldivian authorities and provided succour to hostages. The contents of the book are well organised and placed in logical sequence. The author perhaps could also consider a list of interviewees with the bibliography.

The book is a welcome addition to Indian military history. It fully justifies the author's love to the subject. It is hoped that it will help the service officers and civilians to understand Operation Cactus. To know as how we can do better in future, we ought to know how we did in the past. This is only possible if we have a history to read and learn. The 'appropriate use of history', it can be termed.

—Dr Narendra Yadav



**INDIAN SPACE PROGRAM**  
India's Incredible Journey from the Third World  
Towards the First  
by **GURBIR SINGH**  
Astrotalkuk Publications • PP 632 • \$55.00

**T**here have been many books written on the Indian Space Program, often by ISRO scientists, some by scholars while a few by journalists. While some books written on the said topic usually cover one aspect of Indian Space Program, others cater to a specific time period. Though, it is absolutely impossible to write on every aspect of India's rise as a space power since its inception, the author of the book Gurbir Singh has made a sincere attempt to outline the history of Indian Space Program.

The book starts with the chapter on the rise of National Space Programs where the author traces the history of space programs of various countries such as Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and US. Interestingly, the book offers a glimpse into the early advances of rocketry in India two and a half centuries ago when Mysore's ruler Tipu Sultan used rockets as a tactical weapon in his arsenal to defend his territory against the British who were then trying to further their grasp on the Indian sub-continent.

Though the book is primarily about Indian space program, but the author has written in some detail about the Soviet and American space program as well. The contributions of Wernher Von Braun, Sergei Korolev and Vikram Sarabhai are mentioned, all of whom are pioneers of space programs of USA, USSR and India respectively. The author introduces Sarabhai as a dreamer who dreamt of building India's own indigenous space program, especially at a time when India was just standing on its feet as a newly independent nation.

The book almost provides a brief biography to Vikram Sarabhai's life as it talks about Sarabhai's leadership as the Father of the Indian Space Program. One thing which is noteworthy is that book provides the context to what was happening in the field of basic sciences in India when the idea to have an Indian space program was being conceived. This is why the author has dedicated an entire chapter to the Indian scientists like C.V Raman, J C Bose, S N Bose, Homi Jahangir Bhabhi and even Srinivasa Ramanujan who were doing pioneering research under the British

Raj and played a significant part in the development of science in general in India.

On expected lines, the book covers significant landmarks of Indian space program like India's first rocket launch of Nike-Apache Rockets at Thumba in 1963, the formation of Indian National Committee on Space Research IN 1962 under the leadership of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, building of Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station etc.

The book also covers the SITE experiment conducted in India which brought a revolution in the field of communication. A detail account of ISRO units like Vikram Sarabhai Space Center, Space Applications Center, ISRO propulsion complex have been put out. Sriharikota has been referred as India's 'Spaceport'.

The most interesting and crucial chapter in terms of history of ISRO is provided in chapter ten where the author have discussed about each and every ISRO rockets right from Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV-3) to Augmented Satellite Launch Vehicle (ASLV), Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) and Geo-synchronous Satellite Launch vehicles (GSLV),

The books becomes a bit technical in its approach while discussing the above mentioned things and readers with no technical background might need some patience to go through the middle chapters of this book. But for researchers working on Space, these chapters would prove quite useful as a lot of analytical data is put out to explain the technical aspects of rocketry.

The book covers other important landmarks in India's space history like India's first satellite Aryabhata and the first Indian Astronaut Rakesh Sharma who went into Space. The last few chapters of the book talk about India's lunar mission i.e. Chandrayan- 1 and why India decided to go to Mars.

The last chapter of the book titled Space and National Security is dealt sensitively. Here, India is called a 'regional space power'. The author mentions that ISRO has been clear in its approach that its main goal is to use as a tool for the development of the nation while fulfilling its social and economic needs.

While this robust book touches upon almost all the aspects of Indian Space Program, the book is not like a continuous story which flows in a linear fashion. To sum up, the book is a significant addition to the existing body of literature on the Indian Space Program.

—Martand Jha