

Capt Smit during the video call with Modi.
(narendramodi.in via PTI)

Had to get up & act: Smit to PM

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT AND PTI

New Delhi: Smit Machchhar, the Indian pilot hailed worldwide for saving his passengers' lives after being stabbed in the cockpit by his co-pilot, on Friday told Prime Minister Narendra Modi he had been determined not to let the Flydubai flight crash despite his severe injuries.

Modi had a video call with the heavily bandaged Machchhar, who is recovering in an Abu Dhabi hospital, that was broadcast on official and private news channels.

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Had to get up & act: Captain Smit to PM

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"You are my biggest ideal, Sir. You are calling to encourage me, and I am feeling very proud. At that moment, I was fighting for my own life, but there was one moment when I realised that if I did not do anything right now — because I had fallen — I felt if I do not get up now...," Machchhar, who teared up during the conversation, said before pausing midway.

He recovered to add: "I have 11 years of experience as a captain and 17 years in aviation, so I understand what's happening on the flight even with my eyes closed. I felt the aircraft going down."

Machchhar said that although he lay injured on the cockpit floor, "with whatever energy was left in me, I managed to act properly and saved the plane".

"I was fighting for my life but at the same time I knew I was not going to let others die.... I had so many injuries. I was beaten but I told myself that I have to get up and act," he said.

"I pushed myself to open the cockpit door. The role of other people was equally important."

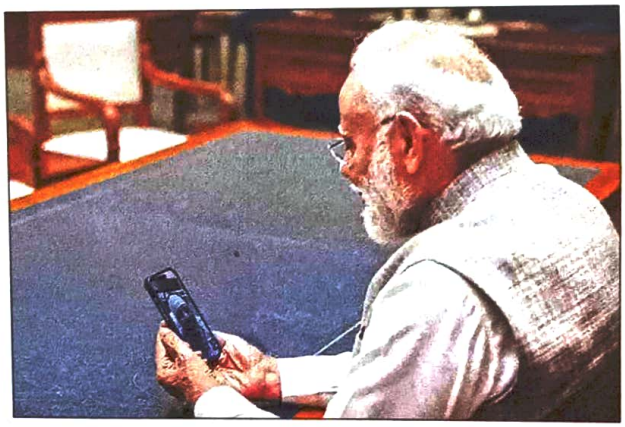
After Machchhar opened the cockpit door, passengers and crew had entered and subdued the co-pilot, said to be an Omani. Two other pilots travelling on the Dubai-Tel Aviv flight managed to land the plane in Tabuk, northwestern Saudi Arabia.

Machchhar said he was receiving the best medical attention.

"When I need positivity and feel pain, I read the Hanuman Chalisa. The moment you called me, I felt proud. Sorry, I am crying in front of you," he said.

"Smit if you don't become emotional in front of me, then where will you be?" Modi said.

Machchhar, who lives with his family in Dubai, continued: "I never thought I would ever speak to you.... When I do puja every morning, I keep my two-year-old son in my lap and recite the Hanuman Chalisa to him.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks with Captain Smit Machchhar over the video call on Friday.
(narendramodi.in via PTI)

"Because I am away from the country, it does not mean that I am away from our culture.... Now I don't feel we are away from the country. People treat us with a lot of love here."

Modi told Machchhar that the entire country was praying for him, and that the Maha Mrityunjaya Jaap was being performed for him.

"Your courage, presence of mind and composure saved many lives. The country can proudly say that we Indians are not those who take lives, but who save lives," he said.

"You were fighting for your life, but at that time, you didn't bother about your life but about the lives of the passengers. And most importantly, you made 140 crore Indians proud."

Modi said Machchhar's act of bravery would enhance the image of Indian pilots worldwide.

"Today is Gandhi Jayanti. You showed what ahimsa is by living it," the Prime Minister said.

He said he had spoken to Machchhar's parents and wife. He praised Machchhar's mother Geetaben for inculcating in him "the values of Krishna's Gita" and his wife Sonal for her fortitude during the crisis.

"I am a phone call away," Modi told Machchhar.

Politicians across parties have praised Machchhar's courage and presence of mind.

Right-wing social media handles have flooded the Internet with posters hailing Machchhar as a Hindu pilot who saved Jews from a suspected Muslim assailant.