

The Journey of UDAN: Soaring Towards Inclusivity in Indian Aviation

In a country where the sky often symbolizes hope and aspiration, the dream of flying has remained an elusive luxury for many. This dream began to take shape with the launch of the Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) - UDAN, or "Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik," on October 21, 2016. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), UDAN aims to enhance regional air connectivity from unserved and underserved airports across India, making air travel affordable. As it celebrates its seventh anniversary, UDAN stands as a testament to the commitment of the Indian government to improve infrastructure and connectivity, especially in remote regions.

The Dream Takes Flight

The first UDAN flight took off on April 27, 2017, connecting the serene hills of Shimla to the bustling metropolis of Delhi. This inaugural flight began a transformative journey in Indian aviation that would open the skies to countless citizens.

A Market-Driven Approach

UDAN operates on a market-driven model, where airlines assess demand on specific routes and submit proposals during bidding rounds. The scheme incentivizes airlines to connect underserved regions by offering support through Viability Gap Funding (VGF) and various concessions provided by airport operators, the Central Government, and State Governments.

Support Mechanisms

The government has implemented several supportive measures to attract airlines to operate flights in less lucrative markets:

- **Airport Operators:** They waive landing and parking charges for RCS flights, and the Airports Authority of India (AAI) does not levy Terminal Navigation Landing Charges (TNLC) on these flights. Moreover, a discounted Route Navigation and Facilitation Charge (RNFC) is applied.
- **Central Government:** Excise duty on Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) purchased at RCS airports capped at 2% for the first three years. Airlines are also encouraged to enter code-sharing agreements to expand their reach.
- **State Governments:** States have committed to reducing VAT on ATF to 1% or less for ten years and providing services such as security, fire, and utility at reduced rates.

This collaborative framework has fostered an environment where airlines can thrive while serving regions that have long been overlooked.

Fuelling Growth of the Aviation Industry

The RCS-UDAN scheme has played a pivotal role in revitalizing the civil aviation industry in India. Over the past seven years, it has catalyzed the emergence of many new and successful airlines. Regional carriers such as Flybig, Star Air, IndiaOne Air, and Fly91 have benefited from the scheme, developing sustainable business models and contributing to a burgeoning ecosystem for regional air travel.

The incremental expansion of the scheme has also generated a rising demand for new aircraft of all sizes, broadening the spectrum of planes deployed on RCS routes. This includes a diverse fleet featuring the Airbus 320/321, Boeing 737, ATR 42 and 72, DHC Q400, Twin Otter, Embraer 145 and 175, Tecnam P2006T, Cessna 208B Grand Caravan EX, Dornier 228, Airbus H130, and Bell 407. Notably, Indian carriers have placed orders for over 1,000 aircraft slated for delivery in the next 10-15 years, significantly augmenting the existing fleet of approximately 800 planes.

Promoting Tourism

RCS-UDAN is not solely dedicated to offering last-mile connectivity to tier-2 and tier-3 cities but is a prominent contributor to the burgeoning tourism sector. Initiatives like UDAN 3.0 have introduced tourism routes connecting several destinations in the Northeast region. At the same time, UDAN 5.1 is focused on expanding helicopter services in hilly areas to stimulate tourism, hospitality, and local economic growth.

Significant destinations like Khajuraho, Deoghar, Amritsar, and Kishangarh (Ajmer) are now more accessible, catering to the religious tourism segment. Furthermore, the introduction of airports in Pasighat, Ziro, Hollongi, and Tezu has spurred growth in the Northeast's tourism industry. Notably, Agatti Island has also been included in the Indian aviation map, enhancing tourism in Lakshadweep.

Boosting Air Connectivity

From Mundra in Gujarat to Tezu in Arunachal Pradesh, and Kullu in Himachal Pradesh to Salem in Tamil Nadu, RCS-UDAN has connected 34

states and Union Territories. 86 aerodromes have been operationalized under UDAN, including ten in the Northeast region and two heliports. Airports like Darbhanga, Prayagraj, Hubli, Belgaum, and Kannur are becoming increasingly sustainable, with many non-RCS commercial flights operating from these locations.

Soaring High: Some UDAN Airports

- **Darbhanga Airport (Civil Enclave):** Once off the aviation map, Darbhanga celebrated the arrival of its first flight from Delhi on November 9, 2020. This airport now serves as a gateway for 14 districts in North Bihar, connecting to major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata, and it will handle over 5 lakh passengers in FY 2023-24.
- **Jharsuguda Airport (AAI Airport):** Previously a dilapidated WWII airstrip, Jharsuguda became operational in March 2019, serving as the second airport in Odisha. It now connects the region to Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Bhubaneswar, with over 2 lakh passengers in FY 2023-24.
- **Pithoragarh Airport:** Nestled in the Himalayas, this airport was identified for RCS operations in 2018 and began service in January 2019. Currently, it connects to Dehradun and Pantnagar, showcasing its strategic importance.
- **Tezu Airport:** Known for its scenic beauty and religious significance, Tezu Airport commenced RCS operations in August 2021. It connects Guwahati, Jorhat, and Dibrugarh, accommodating approximately 12,000 passengers in FY 2023-24.

Creating a Difference for the Aam Nagrik

The Indian aviation landscape has undergone a significant transformation under the UDAN scheme. 601 routes, including helicopter routes, have been operationalized, effectively connecting states and Union Territories. Notably, around 28% of these routes serve the remotest locations, enhancing accessibility across challenging terrains.

The number of operational airports in the country has doubled from 74 in 2014 to 157 in 2024, and the aim is to increase this number to 350-400 by 2047. Domestic air passengers have more than doubled in the past decade, with Indian airlines significantly expanding their fleets.

Eighty-six aerodromes—comprising 71 airports, 13 heliports, and two water aerodromes—have been operationalized, facilitating the travel of over 1.44 crore passengers across more than 2.8 lakh flights. Since their inception, fixed-wing operations have covered approximately 112 crore kilometers, roughly equivalent to circumnavigating the globe around 28,000 times.

Conclusion: A Testament to Inclusivity

UDAN is not just a scheme; it is a movement aimed at empowering every Indian with the gift of flight. Enhancing regional connectivity and ensuring affordability has fulfilled countless citizens' aspirations while stimulating economic growth and job creation. As UDAN continues to evolve, it promises to transform India's aviation landscape, ensuring that the sky truly is everyone's limit. With its ongoing commitment to connecting underserved regions and promoting tourism, the UDAN scheme remains a



game changer for Indian aviation, contributing significantly to India's vision of a connected and prosperous nation.

Reference: PIB releases

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