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Q12

What is the need for expanding the regional air connectivity in India? In this context, discuss the government's UDAN Scheme and its achievements.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS III · 15 marks · Indian Economy

Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment.

Core demand of the question

- State why India needs more regional air connectivity
- Discuss UDAN as the government's scheme in that context
- Give achievements without inventing route counts

Revision summary

Regional air connectivity is needed for hills, islands, the Northeast and smaller cities that lack dense rail-air markets.

It supports medical access, tourism, perishables and a strategic civilian strip in border States.

UDAN (2016) auctions routes with viability-gap funding, some fare caps and cheaper airport charges.

- **Achievements:** multiple bidding rounds, revived and new regional airports, and some helicopter or seaplane experiments.
- **Limits:** several awarded routes lapsed; a flight survives only with catchment demand after the subsidy window.

Introduction

A country that is **wide, mountainous, islanded and unequal** cannot put every district on a broad-gauge timetable tomorrow. **Regional air connectivity** is the faster way to tie a hill capital, a pilgrimage town or a small industrial city to a metro hub. The Union's answer since 2016 has been **UDAN** - Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik - a **viability-gap** scheme, not a free airline.

Body**Why regional air connectivity**

Metro-to-metro aviation already works on **density**. The need is elsewhere. **North-eastern States, Himachal, Uttarakhand, J&K, the island territories and the tribal centre** lose doctors, investors and tourists to a two-day road. Air links cut **perishable time** for horticulture and medical evacuation. They support **balanced regional growth** so that a second-rung city can hold a firm that would otherwise sit in Bengaluru. They are also a **strategic layer: a civilian airport that can take a ATR or a small jet is a backup strip in a border State. Rail and highway remain the mass mode. Aviation is the thin, high-value mesh.** Without subsidy, those thin routes die, because a full-fare Airbus cannot

live on forty seats.

- **Peg:** Last-mile for the Northeast, hills and islands is the core public-need case, not another Delhi-Mumbai frequency.
- **Peg:** Tourism, organs, pharma cold chain and administrative travel are the economic case.

How UDAN works

UDAN / RCS (Regional Connectivity Scheme), run by the **Ministry of Civil Aviation** with the **Airports Authority of India**, auctions routes. The winning airline gets a **viability gap funding** for a limited period, a **cap on some fares**, and extras such as **reduced landing and parking** at public airports. States are asked to join with **GST and fuel** concessions and to help with **security and slots**. The bargain is public money for a **thin route**, not a permanent nationalised airline.

- **Peg:** VGF plus a fare cap is the UDAN deal: the aam nagrik ticket is bought with a public top-up.
- **Peg:** State ATF/GST and land support decide whether a bid is only a Delhi PowerPoint.

Achievements and limits

Airports have been **revived or built** under the same political umbrella, including some **civil enclaves**. **Several rounds of bidding** have awarded routes to **previously unserved or underserved** airports; **new airports and revived strips** have entered the map in the hills and the Northeast; **helicopter and seaplane** windows were opened for terrain that cannot take a jet. Some routes **sustained** after VGF, which is the real success. Many others **lapsed** when an airline exited or traffic did not appear. UDAN has thickened the map. A route is still not a region until **catchment roads, tourism and a second operator** exist.

- **Peg:** Lapsed routes are part of the record; counting only inaugural flights would over-claim.
- **Peg:** The scheme is a market-plus-subsidy experiment, not a finished grid.

Flow diagram

Need: hills NE islands -> UDAN RCS
UDAN RCS -> VGF and fare cap
VGF and fare cap -> New and revived airports
New and revived airports -> Some routes last
New and revived airports -> Some routes lapse

Conclusion

India needs regional flights for hills, islands, the Northeast and second-rung cities that rail will not bind tomorrow. UDAN has auctioned VGF routes and revived airports, with real new links and real lapses. The scheme is a start on the map, not a finished grid.

Facts & figures

UDAN / RCS

Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik, the Regional Connectivity Scheme launched in 2016 by the civil aviation ministry.

Viability gap funding

A time-bound public top-up so an airline will fly a thin route that would not break even at a capped fare.

AAI

Airports Authority of India, a key implementer of airports and the RCS mechanism with the ministry.

Unserved / underserved

The scheme's target airports: places with no scheduled flight, or too few, before the award.

State role

GST, VAT on ATF, land and security support are part of the UDAN bargain with State governments.

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