

# GAME OF DRONES: ON INDIA'S NEW REGULATIONS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Airports

In recent years, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) — often called drones — have exponentially grown in popularity.

Till as recently as three to four years ago, searching for drones on the Internet predominantly resulted in images of weaponised, unmanned military aircraft. But with the rise in recreational use, more people are choosing to document their holidays and weddings from up top. With the multi-billion dollar industry projected to grow in the future, the Ministry of Civil Aviation's announcement late last month permitting the use of commercial drones (albeit with several restrictions) was a welcome shift in policy.

Keen to use it in my journalistic work, I bought my first drone (a Parrot Bebop) in 2016. The first time I flew it, I was terrified it would crash into a tree. I have since become a more adept operator, and for the past two years, I have worked with the Sri Lankan Civil Aviation Authority to promote the use of the device in journalism. We have captured many hours of footage to better illustrate key stories on topics such as the environment, wildlife, urban development and large-scale infrastructure. Our work proved that an aerial perspective adds to ground truths, offering a new way way of seeing and framing them.

Navigating your way through drone regulations can be a complex task. But understanding where these rules come from can help. The regulatory environment in drone usage is meant to protect the safety of airborne crafts, including civilian aeroplanes. Those new to drones do not realise that what they control is not a toy. Adverse weather and fading light conditions can lead to near collisions, crashes or equipment failure.

Regulatory compliance is important, and India has leapfrogged many countries by going for an all-digital platform, making the authorisation process (in theory at least) more seamless.

Come December 1, what can we expect to see? Definitely drone imagery in news broadcasts as well as in commercial entertainment.

Nature and wildlife conservation, archaeology, research on maritime ecosystems, desertification and urban development — all these efforts also stand to benefit.

Expect adrenaline lovers to use drones to capture feats of endurance and adventures. Entities like Indian Railways may also use the devices to check infrastructure conditions or damage, and over time, public-private partnerships can produce drone-based data to help with, for instance, traffic flows and population movement.

Not unlike mobile phones today, drones will, sooner than we expect, become just another device to capture the world around us. Citizens, buying them in the thousands, will use them in ways that will collectively add to the perspectives in the public domain on social media platforms, as well as create memories for family and friends with stunning views only possible with aerial flight.

Leonardo da Vinci said “for once you have tasted flight you will walk the Earth with your eyes turned skywards, for there you have been and there you will long to return”. Drones allow us, as mere humans, to take flight and go where just a few years ago, only our imaginations would have dared wander.

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