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Taking the lead in creating a drone ecosystem

Tamil Nadu government has identified two unused airstrips to set up a drone hub

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T.K. ROHIT

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A public announcement drone being flown from the Anna University campus as Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin inaugurates the Tamil Nadu Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Corporations exhibition. File | Photo Credit: B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

With the ever-increasing usage of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), popularly known as drones, for various applications, the Tamil Nadu government has identified two unused airstrips to set up a drone hub. It is reaching out to national and international companies to set up their facilities there.

Last month, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin inaugurated the Tamil Nadu Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Corporation (TNUAV) set up with an investment of ₹10 crores. This would enable the government to provide a large number of services, especially in agriculture (aerial spraying).

The Tamil Nadu Defence Industrial Corridor (TANDICO), an arm of Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO), plans to convert an unused airstrip in Ulundurpet or Cholvaram into a potential drone hub. The State has approached the Ministry of Defence for approval, B. Krishnamoorthy, Project Director, TANDICO said. Stakeholders including the Indian Air Force are on board about the proposal, he said.

To reduce entry barriers for drone companies, TANDICO is in the process of setting up a drone testing facility. This would either be under the Defence Testing Infrastructure Scheme or other scheme to enable drone manufacturers test their products, which would be an additional enabler for drone manufacturing in the State.

The hub will have common facilities that will facilitate the drone companies to collaborate with each other while also competing. "Since many of these are small companies, we will give them space to grow where we will lease out space when they want to expand their operations," Wing Commander P. Madhusoodhanan, the domain expert consultant for TANDICO, said.

According to him, with the Centre unveiling the Drone Policy last year, the Red Zones — where drones cannot fly — in Tamil Nadu has shrunk drastically. Drone companies are considered as aerospace and defence companies as it provides lots of incentives.

TANDICO has signed MoUs with companies such as ARC Ventures, Vinata Aeromobility, and Vinveli Group for making drones, anti-drones. Another company, Big Bang Boom Solutions, is in the process of finalising a joint venture with TANDICO.

Gokul Anandayuvraj, CEO of Vinveli said the opportunities for drone usage are endless and once the drone hub ecosystem is up and running in the defence corridor, it would provide immense opportunities to drone companies. The company, which counts the NSG and the Ministry of Home Affairs as its clients, has proposed to start trials of its drones for the Indian Army.

R. Shivaraman, founder director, Big Bang Boom Solutions that is primarily focussed on aerospace and defence sectors, said drones could revolutionise the consumer ecosystem and product deliveries could happen at a fraction of the time it takes for a human to deliver a product, while reducing pollution and fuel consumption. "Also, the government needs to frame policies, install infrastructure to keep a tab on the drones and put in place policies for opening up the sector," he said.

Agnishwar Jayaprakash, CEO, Garuda Aerospace, which signed an agreement with TIDCO, said "Drone-based services in government departments will lead to better efficiency and faster results. These could range from project monitoring, mapping, LIDAR based analysis, thermal based inspection, power lines monitoring among others." Garuda recently signed a joint R&D collaboration with IIT Madras to take up space and additionally operate their research facility from the IITM Research Park and to undertake collaborative research on drones for use in niche oil and gas, agriculture and gas detection technologies.

Another start-up at IIT-M, Fabheads is working with several drone companies to develop India's first drone-grade carbon fiber propeller blade, an element that is 100% imported today, its CEO Dhinesh Kanagaraj said.

Usage of drones would reduce risks to human life and health, especially in counter insurgency operations and high-altitude areas for the military while also reducing overall costs.

Explaining about the TNUAV Corporation, Senthil Kumar, Director, Dr. Kalam Advanced UAV Research Centre, MIT Campus, Anna University, said the drones will be used for mapping, disaster management, land survey, mining, monitoring of works, and agricultural pesticide spraying among others

“Using a drone, around 20 acres of agricultural land can be covered in a day for spraying fertilisers or pesticides. Efficiency can be managed, farmers’ lives and health can be sustained because if a person goes and sprays pesticides, it would invariably lead to some health issues for them,” he said. Also, specific areas can be identified for spraying leading to better crops which will be more organic. “With Anna University’s expertise and support, Tamil Nadu can fulfil India’s market for drones,” he said.

There could be a drone boom just like the Information Technology boom, he predicted. “This will also lead to several jobs - image processing jobs, IT jobs, jobs for mechanical engineers, etc,”.

One of the benefits would be tax implications for the government. “Using drones, the government can map out each and every area and might help them for [property] tax computation,” he added.

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