

Civilian drones may account for bulk of 40,000 UAVs in Indian skies despite ban by regulator

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Shailesh Menon | ET Bureau | July 06, 2017, 07:25 IST

Only defence forces, law-enforcement agencies and a few select government companies are allowed to use [drones](#), but that is not stopping civilian ‘droners’ from hitting the skies.

Over the past two years, Indians have spent close to Rs 40 crore buying civil drones, as per estimates of the Consortium of Unmanned Vehicle Systems India (CUVSI). Civil drones, which also include toy drones, bear price tags in the range of Rs 2,000 and Rs 50,000; a rough calculation hints at the presence of 40,000 drones in Indian skies.



“Commercial sales could have easily crossed Rs 100 crore by now,” reckons Pritam Sahu, cofounder of Edall Systems, a Bengaluru-based drone maker. “Civil drones, which are smaller in size and possess lower flight altitude and payload-carrying capabilities, are attracting a lot of interest from buyers. These are mostly used for hobby-flying or aerial photography,” Sahu adds. As per directorate general of civil aviation ([DGCA](#)) rules, it is illegal to employ drones for civilian purposes as these unmanned flying machines pose serious threat to national security.

“Civilian use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) is not permitted in India,” clarifies Huzefa Tavawalla, who heads international commercial law practice at Nishith Desai Associates, a prominent law firm. “The DGCA has banned use of civilian drones, but its sale, per se, is not banned... So you’ll be able to buy drones, but you’re not legally allowed to fly them,” he adds.

Drones are used by PSUs such as NTPC, ONGC, railways, mapping & operators and large agriculture & food processing companies. Pilgrimage centres such as Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams use drones as part of their security detail. Police departments across India have started using drones for surveillance at crowded places – a noteworthy mention being use of UAVs at Kumbh Mela ghats.

“Drones have a lot of utility value in defence and internal security. Our business is shaping up pretty well,” says Ankit Mehta, cofounder of IdeaForge, an IIT-Mumbai incubated drone manufacturer, now on-campus, with their office and manufacturing facility in suburban Mumbai.

No-Fly Zone

Currently, India accounts for the highest percentage of the world’s UAV imports (for defence purposes) at 22.5%. The government has recently entered into an arrangement to purchase armed drones from Israel and the US.

The first formal crackdown on civil drones happened in 2014, when a Mumbai-based Pizzeria used an unmanned carrier to air-drop pizzas a few blocks down the road. The DGCA swung into action and imposed a blanket ban on the use of civil drones. Law enforcement agencies supported the ban as they feared unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) could be used for nefarious activities.

“It’s perfectly fine to regulate advanced drones as these can be misused by unscrupulous elements... But a blanket ban is unfair. Drones have enormous commercial possibilities,” says Sahu of Edall Systems. In April 2016, the DGCA released draft guidelines on possible drone regulations in India. The paper divided UAVs into four categories on basis of their weight – micro UAVs (less than 2 kg), mini (less than 20 kg), small (between 20 and 150 kg) and large (greater than 150 kg). The draft also suggested a unique identification number (UIN) for all types of UAVs – irrespective of their use or technical capabilities. UINs – much on the lines of number plates on automobiles -- would only be issued to Indian citizens or corporate bodies having permanent establishment in the country after getting clearance from the local police department.

The 'drone' will get a UIN only after he submits details such as the proposed use of drones, manufacturing details and other technical specifications.

"Now such rules are pretty harsh on hobby flyers... For recreational flyers, the rules have to be in line with other foreign countries. The government should only be concerned about drones that can carry higher payloads," advocates Tavawalla.

That apart, there are laws that prevent drones from dropping or discharging substances, unless specifically cleared and mentioned in the permits given by local authorities and DGCA.

Great utility value

DGCA's ban has not seen effective enforcement as drones are being sold in large numbers through online marketplaces. A good number of these are manufactured by Chinese companies and marketed as 'toy drones.' A toy drone – weighing up to a kg – can fly for 15-20 minutes, with a flight range of 1 km and an altitude range of 130 feet above ground level.

"Manufacturers are trying to make drones that can fly longer and also carry load. You'll see a lot of advanced 'hexacopters' and 'octacopters' in the coming years," predicts Dinesh Sain, co-founder of Drona Aviation, a startup operating from IIT-Mumbai campus.