

Quiet climate breakthrough

At a time when climate debates are often filled with pessimism and blame games, India has quietly delivered a development that deserves global attention. A new analysis by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air has found that India's carbon dioxide emissions grew in 2025 at the slowest rate in more than two decades. The numbers carry a deeper message about the direction in which the country is moving. According to the report, India's CO2 emissions rose by just 0.7 per cent in 2025, with growth in the second half of the year limited to only 0.5 per cent. This marks a dramatic slowdown compared to the 4 to 11 per cent annual growth seen during the previous four years. Excluding the exceptional disruption caused by the pandemic in 2020, this is the slowest pace of emissions growth since 2001. More significant is what is happening inside the power sector. Emissions from power generation fell by 3.8 per cent in 2025. This is not a small shift. For years the power sector has been one of the biggest contributors to India's emissions growth. A reversal in this trend signals that the country's energy transition is beginning to show real impact. The reasons behind this shift are equally noteworthy. India added a record amount of clean energy capacity in 2025. Nearly 47 gigawatts of solar power, 6.3 gigawatts of wind energy, 4 gigawatts of hydropower and additional nuclear capacity were brought online. Together, this new capacity is expected to generate around 90 terawatt hours of electricity annually. That is twice the clean energy generation added in the previous year. At the same time, dependence on imported coal has reduced sharply. Consumption of imported coal at power plants fell by 20 per cent during the year. This is not only an environmental milestone but also an economic and strategic one. Lower reliance on fossil fuel imports strengthens India's energy security and protects the economy from global price shocks. This development must be seen in the context of India's larger journey. Unlike many developed nations that industrialised over two centuries using fossil fuels, India is attempting to balance growth with sustainability within a much shorter time frame. It is lifting millions out of poverty, expanding infrastructure and powering a fast growing economy while also investing heavily in renewable energy. The slowdown in emissions growth therefore sends a powerful signal. It shows that development and environmental responsibility do not have to be opposing goals. With the right policy direction, technology and long term vision, the two can move together. For the rest of the world, especially countries still struggling to find a workable balance between development and climate commitments, India's example offers valuable lessons. It demonstrates that responsible growth is possible without compromising national aspirations. If the momentum continues, India will not only power its own future more sustainably but also provide a model for others to follow. In many ways this is what a nation destined to shape the future of the world should look like.

High Fuel, No User Grounds UDAN

BUILD RAIL, NOT RUNWAYS

■ SHIVAJI SARKAR

At a critical time of fuel scarcity, the push to the nearly a decade-old India's Regional Connectivity Scheme—UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik)—is confronting a hard truth: aviation cannot be socially engineered into viability.

Despite a renewed push involving tens of thousands of crores in public spending—now again allocated Rs 28,840 crore in expanded commitments—the scheme's structural weaknesses are becoming more pronounced, not less. The country needs to review the policy as railway and regional metro transit are serving better.

The bus services are becoming scarce even in cities like Delhi, which has the lowest number of 1300 DTC buses now. Most regions—Bengal to Gujarat—are suffering because of vehicle-scraping policies, instead of incentivising proper maintenance and diesel junking in favour of high-cost low-utility battery buses with far shorter life, often said to reach half-life in four years.

What was conceived as a democratisation of air travel risks turning into a cautionary tale of misplaced priorities. Even in the North-East with a difficult terrain could not succeed as most operators ceased services. The reason no different from other areas—routes could not attract enough passengers.

Between 2020 and March 2026, India saw multiple fatal helicopter and small aircraft crashes involving military, government, and pilgrimage services. Major incidents include 2022 Pawan Hans accident in the Arabian Sea, and several 2025 crashes in Uttarakhand's Kedarnath sector killing multiple pilgrims.

The region has seen repeated accidents due to difficult terrain, unpredictable weather, and heavy traffic. Common causes include Controlled Flight into Terrain (CFIT) and low visibility. Authorities have periodically suspended services and tightened safety norms, but risks remain significant as the latest Baramati accident of a private company plane killing Maharashtra minister Ajit Pawar shows.

Infrastructure Without Passengers
UDAN's premise was simple: build airports, subsidise airlines, and demand will follow. But aviation demand does not arise from infrastructure alone. It is a function of income, business activity, and time sensitivity.

Many small airports revived under the scheme remain underutilised or intermittently operational. Seven airports were closed in Uttar Pradesh alone. Ayodhya airport has hardly any commercial flight. The reason is straightforward—passenger volumes are too low. India's air traffic continues to be concentrated along major metro and high-density routes, while Tier-III towns lack the economic base to sustain regular flights. Even where routes exist, load factors remain weak. Aircraft often fly half-empty, making operations commercially unviable despite subsidies.

The Broken Economics of Small Aircraft

Regional aviation depends on turboprops and small aircraft. These planes are ideal for short runways but are significantly more expensive per seat than larger jets. It has been surviving on viability gap funding by the government (VGF), which now again is extended

by Rs 10,042 crore. Airlines grumble that the payments are delayed and say subsidies cannot compensate indefinitely for poor economics.

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Each new airport brings fixed costs—maintenance, staffing, security—without assured passenger traffic, risking underused assets turning into liabilities. The real question is

Smaller airlines operating these routes have struggled with thin margins, high maintenance costs, and low yields. Many have either exited or reduced operations. In several cases, routes survived only when taken over by larger carriers deploying bigger aircraft—defeating the purpose of regional connectivity. If UDAN was already fragile, the ongoing Iran conflict has exposed its vulnerability. The war has disrupted global energy flows and pushed up aviation turbine fuel (ATF) prices, which already account for 30–40% of airline operating costs. Since early March 2026, fuel prices have surged due to supply disruptions, forcing Indian airlines such as Air India, IndiGo, and Akasa Air to impose fuel surcharges. For regional aviation, this is devastating. Small aircraft operations are highly fuel-sensitive. Unlike major carriers, regional operators lack the financial strength to absorb shocks or hedge fuel costs. In effect, the Iran war has not just increased costs—it has rendered the UDAN model even more unsustainable. The crisis is not limited to fuel. Currency depreciation, maintenance costs, and insurance premiums have all risen, adding pressure on airlines. At the same time, passenger growth has slowed. India's aviation sector is expected to incur losses of up to Rs 10,500 crore in FY2026 due to high costs and subdued traffic. This combination—rising costs and weak demand—is lethal for regional routes. Airlines respond predictably: cut frequencies, withdraw from routes, or avoid smaller airports altogether. UDAN, designed in a low-cost, high-growth environment, is now operating in a high-cost, uncertain one. One of the most overlooked flaws of the scheme is its pricing distortion. Subsidised fares and flat cost structures do not reflect market realities. In practice, small exporters, low-income passengers, and thin routes bear disproportionate burdens. When costs rise—especially fuel—there is little flexibility to adjust pricing without killing demand altogether. It also compromises with safety in a fragile ecosystem.



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The Fuel Shock: Iran War Changes the Equation

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Rising Costs, Falling Demand

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Uniform Pricing, Unequal Pain

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Connectivity vs Viability: Rail vs Air

The government's response to UDAN's shortcomings has been to expand—adding over 100 destinations, more helipads, and committing large public funds. Yet expansion does not fix viability; it spreads inefficiency.

not whether UDAN can grow, but whether it should.

India's connectivity needs are undeniable, but aviation is not always the best solution. For distances of 300–800 km, railways—especially trains like Vande Bharat Express—offer faster, cheaper, and more energy-efficient travel. Railways carry more passengers, require less investment, and integrate better with local transport systems. Strengthening rail links between Tier-II and Tier-III cities could yield far higher returns than building idle airports.

At its core, UDAN reflects a policy contradiction: treating aviation as a public good while expecting private airlines to operate profitably on weak routes. This has led to a cycle of expansion, underperformance, and repeated funding. With rising fuel costs, safety concerns, and weak demand, regional aviation cannot survive on subsidies alone. In many cases, the answer lies not in more flights—but in better trains.

A more rational approach would prioritise economic viability over geographic coverage, and invest where demand already exists—or can realistically emerge. In many parts of India, that may not mean more flights. It may simply mean better trains.---
INFA

Bharat & New Possibilities of Peace and Balance through Freedom from Maoism

■ LALIT GARGG

In a vast, diverse, and democratic nation like India, internal security challenges have always been multidimensional. Among these challenges, Naxalism or Maoist violence has remained a serious problem that affected the country's internal peace, development, and governance for decades. Particularly in tribal-dominated regions of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, Maoist activities not only obstructed development but also led to the loss of thousands of innocent civilians and security personnel. However, today the situation appears to be at a decisive turning point. The surrender of top Maoist commander Papa Rao, who carried a bounty of ₹25 lakh, along with his associates in Bastar—once considered the strongest Maoist stronghold—is not merely an isolated incident but a historic signal. It would not be an exaggeration to say that India now stands at the threshold of freedom from Maoism.

Naxalism had its roots in social and economic inequality, neglect, and exploitation.

But over time, the movement drifted away from its original objectives and transformed into a violent and destructive ideology. Maoist organizations not only obstructed development projects but also controlled local populations through fear and violence. Destroying schools, roads, and health centers became part of their strategy. This made it clear that the movement was no longer about public welfare, but about power and control. The Government of India had set a target to make the country free from Naxalism by 31 March 2026, and that goal now appears to be in its final phase. Over the past decade, more than 10,000 Maoists have surrendered. Aggressive and strategic operations by security forces, along with rapid development in affected regions, have significantly weakened the Maoist movement. Incidents of Maoist violence have declined considerably in states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Maharashtra.

The success behind this transformation lies in the government's multi-dimensional strategy, which focused not only on security operations but also on development, rehabilitation, and administrative outreach.

Construction of roads and bridges in Red Corridor areas, expansion of 4G mobile networks, establishment of schools and ITI institutes, and improved connectivity have helped integrate these regions into the national mainstream. The strategy of fortified police stations enabled security forces to penetrate Maoist strongholds and carry out decisive operations. At the same time, rehabilitation policies for surrendered Maoists—providing financial assistance, employment opportunities, and social reintegration—encouraged many cadres to lay down arms. The surrender of top leadership weakened the organizational structure from within, bringing the movement closer to collapse.

This achievement reflects strategic clarity, coordinated policy implementation, and strong political will. The approach of combining security and development has brought positive transformation in Maoist-affected areas. The increasing number of surrenders in Bastar indicates that Maoist organizations are now fighting for survival. The surrender of top leaders symbolizes not just the fall of individuals but the decline of an entire violent ideology. The biggest ben-

efit of freedom from Maoism will be the establishment of peace and stability in regions that have suffered from violence for decades. When guns fall silent, the voice of development becomes louder. Roads will be built, schools will function, healthcare facilities will improve, and most importantly, a sense of security and confidence will return to people's lives. Tribal and rural communities, who lived for years in fear and insecurity, will finally be able to benefit from their rights and opportunities.

Furthermore, the end of Maoist violence will strengthen India's internal security. Only when a country is internally stable can it effectively deal with external threats. Problems like Naxalism often provide opportunities for anti-national and foreign elements, and eliminating such threats is essential for national interest and strategic stability. Now that Maoist influence is declining, this is a historic opportunity for the government to establish strong foundations of good governance in these regions. Local self-governance institutions must be strengthened, local leadership should be encouraged, and public participation must be increased. At the same time, Maoist ide-

ology must also be challenged at the intellectual level through education, awareness, and dialogue, emphasizing that violence can never be a solution in a democracy. Change must come through peaceful and constitutional means.

It is also important to ensure that the conditions that originally gave rise to this problem—social injustice, economic inequality, and neglect—do not re-emerge. Development in tribal regions must be inclusive and respectful of their culture, identity, and rights. Not only physical infrastructure but also social and cultural empowerment is equally important. Freedom from Maoism is not merely a security achievement; it is a victory of India's democracy, development, and governance. It symbolizes the nation's ability to resolve internal conflicts through determination, strategy, and inclusive development. The next step is to ensure that this achievement becomes permanent and that an environment of peace, prosperity, and balance is established across the country. When every citizen feels safe, respected, and empowered, only then can the dream of an ideal governance system truly be realized.