

KIA went above its head, Bengaluru hopes its 2nd airport won't

Bengaluru's proposed second airport is being framed as an answer to the city's future aviation needs.

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Last Updated : 17 May 2026, 03:58 IST

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With no alternative route to the airport, everyone from everywhere ends up at Hebbal, creating a major chokepoint. DH FILE PHOTO

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As passenger traffic at Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) continues to rise sharply, planners argue that another airport is inevitable for a metropolis expected to expand further in the next two decades. But beneath the aviation narrative lies a larger and more pertinent urban question: has Bengaluru learnt anything from the way the city grew around its first airport?

‘Yes’ is the instinctive answer, but for a burgeoning city, there are far too many metrics to consider.

Beyond aircraft movement or passenger capacity, the second airport is about the model of urban expansion Bengaluru continues to pursue.

The city risks repeating the same planning failures that followed the development of KIA in the north: development heavily driven by speculative real estate, while public transport, drainage, roads and civic services struggle to keep pace.

While Industries Minister M B Patil told DH that the second airport was being planned to accommodate the city's growth and has little to do with the existing airport's shortcomings, urban experts feel it is prudent to learn from mistakes.

Before Kempegowda international airport (KIA) opened in 2008, Bengaluru's aviation needs were handled by the HAL airport in the heart of the city.

As air traffic surged alongside IT boom, the airport struggled with limited runway capacity, congestion and restrictions on expansion.

The shift to Devanahalli marked more than an airport relocation – it fundamentally altered Bengaluru's urban geography.

Growth began moving northwards, triggering large-scale real-estate development, new business corridors and infrastructure investments around ,the airport region.

But it also deepened car dependency and long commutes, exposing how rapidly Bengaluru expanded without matching public transport and civic infrastructure.

Even today, the airport remains deeply dependent on private vehicles and taxis, contributing to congestion and long commutes.

Urban planners warn that the second airport could create another economic node before the city resolves the structural issues exposed by the first one.

R K Misra, urban expert and independent director at B-SMILE, likens KIA to an island. “An airport brings people from other places to the city and takes people from the city to other places, but how does one reach the airport in Bengaluru? What we have today is an island, which is far removed from the city,” he said.

Citing the example of the newly opened Navi Mumbai international airport, he mentions how it was built keeping metro connectivity in mind.

“In Bengaluru, we’re yet to get metro connectivity, 18 years after the airport started. Once you’re at the airport, everything is beautiful, but reaching there is the biggest hurdle. This shouldn’t repeat at the new airport,” he said.

Urban planners and policymakers predominantly highlighted the traffic chokepoint at Hebbal.

“There's no alternative route to the airport. With Begur and Budigere roads in such horrible condition, everyone from everywhere ends up at Hebbal, creating a major chokepoint. The new airport, irrespective of where it comes up, must be well connected to all parts of the city,” Misra said.

Bengaluru police commissioner Seemant Kumar Singh said the airport plan must include road infrastructure with maximum number of lanes possible.

“We shouldn't wait till phase 2 or 3 of expansion to improve road infrastructure. We can plan ahead and mitigate potential traffic chokepoints. Also, it is very important that the proposed airport has ample connectivity with arterial roads such as satellite town ring road and outer ring road. The planning, if possible, should include a double flyover,” he elaborated.

Connectivity within

An accessibility report must remain at the core of the proposed second airport, believes Ashish Verma, convener of the sustainable transportation lab at Indian Institute of Science.

“The focus must be on how much you reduce distances to the airport. And how much are you pushing for shared, electric and active mobility,” he said, highlighting the need for accessibility within airport premises.

“Currently, the KIA operator is planning one metro station for both terminals as well as the proposed terminal 3. The distance to the metro station itself often becomes a deterrent for many when it comes to adopting public transport. This is a common problem at quite a few Indian airports. Setting up a shuttle service is not a solution. Instead, similar to Dubai airport, each terminal must internally have access to the metro,” he said.

Both getting into the airport and out of it must be equally an accessible and streamlined process, which is currently not the case at KIA, he said.

Urban planners stressed the need for a more planned residential development around the new airport, in comparison to “haphazard and one-way” development around KIA, where accompanying infrastructure came in years after the airport was developed.

Published 17 May 2026, 03:58 IST

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