

# FOCUS ON 'COPTERS



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### DISASTER PROOF

Uttarakhand government has decided to set up chopper landing facilities



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### JUHU IS 'NO FLY'

Choppers find taking off tough as Juhu airport's runway is shortened by AAI

## A chopper to office

The day is not far off when corporate bosses will fly together to visit their factories and offices far away from the cities. Mumbai-based Baron has launched the concept of helicopter pool services which is becoming popular, reports **Tirthankar Ghosh**



**READY TO FLY:** Bell 402 chopper employed by Mumbai-based Baron Luxury and Lifestyles

On-demand chopper services have not really taken off in the country but there are quite a few takers – most of them from the corporate sector. Of late, a number of Mumbai-based corporate bigwigs have found that it is easier to take a chopper ride to their production centres in Nasik, Aurangabad, Pune or Vapi than using slower forms of transport. In fact, choppers are ideal for rural locations that lack airstrips.

While there are a few helicopter providers around the country, an entrepreneur who is optimistic about such services is Rajeev Wadhwa. Calling himself a first generation serial entrepreneur with extensive experience in nurturing innovative business ideas,

Wadhwa has targeted customers with factories in remote locations. As he told a daily, these customers were not the ultra-rich but were “aged between 35-45, with a business volume of ₹50-100 crore”.

Wadhwa is the Founder and Chairman of Baron Luxury and Lifestyles. The company aims to corporatise the General Aviation market in the country by consolidating aircraft inventory, aggregating customers and professionalising the approach towards quality of services to match with the global standards. Baron is poised to fly over 5000 hours in 2013-014 with an inventory base of 25 aircraft from its present eight. The company has a large fleet of single and twin engine

helicopters that it hopes to utilise through its unique Business Partner Program that provides individuals and businesses all the benefits of owning a large fleet of helicopters/aircraft at a fraction of the cost of ownership.

Rajeev Wadhwa and Baron have been providing choppers to fly out entrepreneurs for a year now. The programme has yet to become popular. As Wadhwa put it rather matter-of-factly, “It’s early days in promoting a concept of utility flying as far as India is concerned.” The programme, he emphasised, “requires a significant amount of customer education and cost justification to popularise the concept. It requires efforts,” he said. Baron reaches



**COMFORTABLE SITTING:** Inside view of a Bell 402 chopper employed by Baron Luxury and Lifestyles

out to such entrepreneurs through social networking and explains to them how private flying can be an alternate option and how it can enhance the performance, productivity and ultimately business with the effective use of the time. “We do believe that it has a great future and in the next two-three years’ time, more corporates will bring private flying as part of their business application to enhance their performance and not just look at it as a lifestyle product.”

Helicopter pools had not really taken off in the country, as Captain Uday Gelli of the Rotor Wing Society of India was quoted saying, “The concept of helicopter pool has been tried in the past too. It failed as it was not possible to co-ordinate and synchronise the schedules of passengers.”

Wadhwa pooh-poohed the idea. “Let me ask you,” he queried, “who started helicopter pool services in the past? When was it started? And who was promoting it? I don’t recall any such initiative taken in the past. If so (helicopter pool services were there), it was not marketed or taken to the market very effectively.”

Baron believes that selling per seat basis on helicopters would have its own concerns and apprehensions. “We are not selling by the seat to a location (as yet). However, going forward, air-taxi operations by using or by selling per-seat basis will become popular,” he said. It would take some time before such kind of programmes can be made successful. In fact, he outlined some reasons why helicopter pool services had not gained takers yet.

These were:

- Lack of customer education about private flying
- Lack of helicopter resources dedicated to business application programmes
- Absence of a collaborative module: a helicopter has a maximum of ten seats and achieving optimisation would basically mean a full load on a given day and time. A chopper cannot wait for a few people and delay the schedule. Creating such a schedule in a non-scheduled business is a big challenge.

Even so, Baron has chalked out



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**Rajeev Wadhwa**

Founder and Chairman  
Baron Luxury and Lifestyles

plans to launch similar facilities in other parts of the country. “Such plans,” said Wadhwa, “are definitely on our cards.” The company has started Baron Eagle, a unique “invitation only” membership programme that “is a connecting point for the corporates” to get aircraft ownership for business and leisure. The membership, incidentally, is close to 100. Such people will be able to have a significant amount of usage for business. “We are certain that with our success in Mumbai, we will be able to replicate the programme in the metros first and then go to remote location where there are large factory establishments.”

Speaking about the obstacles that chopper operators face in India, Wadhwa said helipads — or rather the lack of them — was one of the biggest problems. “Helipads are not only in limited quantity but expensive, too. In south Mumbai for e.g. hardly any exist,” said the Baron Chairman. Add to that the cost of landing which is extremely high on private helipads. “In Mahalaxmi,” said Wadhwa, “it costs ₹20,000. Also, it requires a significant amount of coordination when it comes to taking approvals from local authorities wherever a helicopter has to land.” On-the-ground operations for a helipad were “extremely time consuming”. Another reason why helicopter operations had not taken off was weather conditions. Helicopters in Mumbai are non-operational in monsoon — they are definitely not viable solutions, said Wadhwa and operators could not provide 100 per cent assurance of chopper services through the year.

However, the situation was improving. Now, with elections round the corner, some states had decided to make politicians pay for the creation of helipads. Whether it would make a difference to the chopper business or not is a moot question but Wadhwa stressed the fact that it was not the politicians who build helipads. “During elections, helicopters land at places where there are no helipads... I don’t think more helipads that have been created only for elections. However if elections can help build more helipads in the country, then it’s a welcome idea. And whoever makes an investment in creating helipads on a long-term basis will benefit... on every landing the helipad owner will get paid. We welcome more helipads in the country,” he said. ■