

Our philosophy: Build it and they will come

G. VISWANATHI

Recently at a seminar in Mumbai, Udit Sheth, founder and Managing Director of TransStadia, welcomed the move by the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports to include sports in the harmonised master list of infrastructure.

"This is indeed good news as infrastructure is going to catalyse this industry in India. The talent and appetite is there, but infrastructure is wanting. TransStadia has already set the process in motion by building a state-of-the-art multi-sport urban infrastructure project in Ahmedabad which will debut with India's very own sport — the 2016 Kabaddi World Cup," Mr. Sheth had said.

The seven-floor, Rs. 550 crore 'Arena by TransStadia' facility, built on a Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model, will soon turn out to be a sports hub in India.

In this interview, Mr. Sheth talks about why he got into creating the modern facility on a 13.72 lakh sq. feet built up area in the city.

Excerpts

It's not easy to germinate an idea like this... build a modern sport facility for multiple (14) games? What's the feedback?

"Build it and they will come". With this philosophy, we designed state-of-the-art facilities replete with everything. The people who have seen it love the fact that its multi-faceted and designed around the performers/players/fans and officials. We are able to cater to the needs in a world-class manner. We have had feedback such as "Wow!", "where is the next one being built?" or "this is what India needs." This is heartening and humbling too!

What's your background in sport? Did spending time at Purdue influence you?

I have loved sport from as long as I remember. I have excelled at football, basketball and volleyball. Even in college I used to play a lot. My mother couldn't believe that I would wake up at 5.30 a.m to catch an NBA game but couldn't bother to study.

When I was at Purdue, I had seen a lot of sport infrastructure for various types of competitions. We are far behind in creating multi-use spaces as per world standards. At TransStadia, we have collaborated with the best minds, be it players, coaches and leaders, to ensure that the arena was built in a cost-effective manner with efficient utilisation and planning.

India does not have a sporting ethos. In the absence of this crucial factor, what convinced you that TransStadia will be a viable venture?

Good question. TransStadia's viability is built on leisure, entertainment, retail, hospitality and more. We have built fantastic facilities with the objective that people will come and enjoy recreation. The revenue we generate would be partially allocated to sports development in consultation with the authorities. We are excited about the fu-



OPTIMISTIC: Udit Sheth, founder of TranStadia, is upbeat that the world-class, multi-purpose 'Arena by TransStadia' facility in Ahmedabad will soon turn out to be a sports hub in India.

— PHOTO: VIJAY SONER

ture TransStadia holds.

Does India have the technology to maintain a world-class facility?

Facility management is an operations management programme. It is about doing the same thing over and over but better. So, with training and manpower development, we are confident it will do well and be well maintained.

Effective usage will also ensure proper upkeep. Other facilities in India don't have the utilisation, so people lock it and keep it and that isn't good. Like machines, the more you use them, the less the probability of rust.

Is India ready for more such facilities? You have made presentations to Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and two more States.

India is not only ready, but is waiting for more such facilities. I have seen fantastic fan and player responses in Ahmedabad and I think India needs more than one of these in each of its urban areas. Sports infrastructure is a \$10 billion industry globally and we are just beginning with baby steps in this direction.

Facilities built for Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, SAF Games and National Games are all virtually government-owned. How will TransStadia work its PPP undertaking?

We are confident of building multi-use facilities with mixed use planning for better revenues. If you see, many of the government stadiums have more cobwebs than anything. Also they are very restrictive as they are built on old technology. One needs to upgrade them on PPP models and do a sports development-oriented revenue share. That's the need of the hour.

TransStadia is still a work-in-progress. When will the full project be completed?

We, for all practical reasons, are ready. We have not opened commercially since we wanted to put all the efforts behind the Kabaddi World Cup. We will open right after that. In the next 60 days, some minor areas will be finished.

Are you happy the way the Kabaddi World Cup has transpired?

I am happy if the stakeholders are. So far they are very happy, but we are taking feedback to ensure we keep upgrading our output and services for fans, players and organisers.

We are grateful to IKF and Star Sports for keeping their faith in us. New places have lot of teething issues and as someone put it "its baptism by fire". We are hard-working and open to learning. That's the difference.

From where have the resources come?

We have invested our own money on a 1:2 equity to debt programme. Bank of Baroda, Union Bank and Bank of India have also supported us.

What's the best way the facility can be used by sports federations?

Federations can count on us to make it their home for sports science, rehab and elite athlete training. Further we are happy to host some of their tournaments.

Football appears to be of big interest to you?

I used to play a lot of football and really enjoyed it. I am trying to put that passion to good use here. Thanks to my father's support and the support of everyone else, we could create this idea.

Gujarat is not known to be sports-minded when compared to many other States. Why did you go there? Is it because of the interest shown by the Sports Authority of Gujarat (SAG) or the State Government?

Sports business is all about TV. And as long as there is consumption on ground, there isn't an issue. Even if a State doesn't produce athletes, it has no impact on the same.

Having said that, the Gujarat government has been very proactive. It has a new model sports policy to which we have contributed. They have worked hard in upping their budgets and the results are showing.

I remember how Mr. Narendra Modi, when he was the CM, had welcomed me. I did not know him but admired how he developed Gujarat. He works like a CEO. His manner of welcoming me as a 29 year old was unprecedented. He invited and taught me as to how I could make this happen.

His pro-active affinity for sports development and a 'sports for all' vision was one of the big motivators for me to get into this field. With his decisive leadership, coupled with strong support from my father, I was able to work on this. I thank the entire group of people associated with TransStadia for bringing this vision alive.