

Sushir Vohra

Giving unequivocal powers to state governments on how land is to be used and regulated has proven to be a big mistake. You just need to survey the landscape in and around important cities and across India, to see the and how it is growing d. In recent weeks ve stumbled across e of official an- and unconfirmed eaffirm this belief. owse through the ads, one term will ur eye. It's called 'pre- and the word 'dis- usually appended to it. ese ads are saying is if you invest in this project before the builder officially launches it, you will get a discount of up to 5 percent on your house. On a Rs 20 lakh house, that's a cool saving of Rs 1 lakh. But do you know in the pool of projects that

are making this compelling offer, there are some that will never get off the ground. Reason: these projects don't have regulatory approvals—and might not even get it.

The Jaipur Development Authority has been issuing ads warning people from buying plots on the new Jaipur-Ajmer highway in projects for which the builders haven't secured regulatory approvals, sometimes haven't even bought the land! I am told that the Haryana government has stopped giving approvals to builders for constructing on agricultural land—the bone of regulatory contention in pre-launch offers—till it reviews the effect of this rampant conversion. It's why property prices in Sonapat have fallen about 35 per cent in the past four months and have eased up in Gurgaon too.

But for every Jaipur that is taking corrective steps, there is a Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Am-

Laws of the land



CHERIAN THOMAS

Stripping state governments of regulatory powers will check land scams and haphazard urban development

ritsar, where pre-launch and change in land use are thriving. At the first hint of infrastructure development along a highway

or a prominent road, builders buy agricultural lands abutting it. Then, they work the state machinery to get the land use

changed to commercial or residential. Often, they don't even wait for these approvals to come through. It's risky for people

who are buying (See 'House of Cards', May 28). And it's disastrous from an urban planning standpoint.

An arbitrary policy on change of land use makes a mockery of town planning laws. Instead of planning towns and cities holistically, it encourages haphazard growth, where infrastructural development becomes a necessary afterthought.

It happened in Gurgaon. It is happening in the three largest cities of Punjab. It will happen in all cities and towns that don't give priority to urban planning and have weak regulatory laws. In Amritsar, property is exchanging hands on the 20 km stretch between the city and the Wagah border, in the expectation that improving relations with Pakistan will increase its economic value. This development pattern defies conventional urban planning laws and, in this case, even poses a threat to the nation's security.

The way out is stricter laws and better implementation. There is a comprehensive real estate regulation in the works that might plug such anomalies. Called the Real Estate Management (Control and Regulation) Bill, it is currently being made for the National Capital Region, but could later be extended to the rest of the country. Maybe that's why developers are trying to make their money while the going is good.

Things wouldn't have come to such a pass if land, rather than being on the state list, was on the Central list or the concurrent list. Perhaps this was of little concern to our founding fathers. But when such a precious resource is squandered away by irresponsible state governments, as is happening, it is time to review the wisdom of giving them absolute control.

The author is an architect and a member of the committee redrafting Delhi's building byelaws

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