

**By Sidharth Mishra**



In times not very far back in Delhi's political history, if a politician was introduced as "zameen se jude hue neta", it did not mean the person was essentially a grassroots leader. It often meant that he was associated with dealing in plotting of land in the unauthorised colonies.

The central government this week decided to regularise all the 1797 such colonies ahead of the assembly polls scheduled towards January-end next year. That it's a politically expedient decision, goes without saying with more than one-third of the city's population living in these colonies spread over 35 of the 70 constituencies.

This move could prove to be a game changer in a race where so far Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party for now looked to be ahead of its rivals. An analysis of the Lok Sabha polls results would show that the voters in the unauthorised colonies polled in large numbers in favour of the BJP candidates, with the hope that the Centre would oblige them by ending the illegal status of their colonies. Thus, this move could be seen both as a payback by the BJP leadership and also an investment for a favourable result in the upcoming assembly elections.

The city's population has today grown to 25 million from 1.7 million people in 1947. With economic distress prevailing in almost all the north Indian states over the past several decades, people kept migrating to Delhi in search of livelihood. With the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the agency responsible for development of the metropolitan, failing to rise to the challenge of providing hearth to the migrant population, the farm lands were converted into housing colonies, albeit unauthorizedly, thus the name unauthorised colonies.

Around 57 years ago, when the issue had first cropped, Delhi had just 110 unauthorized colonies with around 221,000 people living in them. Today, it has 1,797 such colonies, and not to forget that a large number of them have been authorized in the past, the last being in 1993.

To those not conversant with the issue, unauthorized colonies doesn't mean habitat of the poor but they rather are hub of a new politically and socially active class. These colonies already have the basic water and power connections and also sanitation services as the MLAs and MPs have been allowed to spend their local area development funds in these clusters.

Then what's the relief Wednesday's cabinet decision brings? The government statement explains saying that a law would be brought which would provide for ownership rights for the residents of these colonies with the power to mortgage their property. This, however, would happen not only after appropriate laws are passed but also rules of business accordingly amended.

According to the statement by the Centre, the proposed bill, which is scheduled to be brought during the winter session of Parliament beginning November 18, is aimed at recognising general power of attorney (GPA), will, agreement to sell, purchase and possession documents, which will be a one-time relaxation for this purpose for the residents of these colonies. The bill will also provide for registration charge and stamp duty on last transaction and also address the issue of income tax liability on account of less than circle rate charges.

The move would very importantly also bring relief from the ban imposed by the Supreme Court on all the construction in these colonies. The Supreme Court in April 2018 had ordered an immediate stay on all constructions in the unauthorised clusters as they were not in conformity with the building bylaws, as none existed for them.

Every time that the courts have tried to implement land use and zoning regulations as provided for in the Master Plan, the government of the day has regularised these colonies justifying the move as a final compromise which would never be repeated. However, this has never proved to be true. Despite three large-scale regularisation drives in the past, the process for the fourth one has now been initiated with the Central government's fiat.

The Courts have objected to the rise of unauthorised colonies as unplanned urbanisation of the city, more than the farmland fires from the neighbouring states, has added to the environmental woes. The Supreme Court-appointed monitoring committee had submitted a report in July 2019 saying that regularisation of unauthorised colonies puts strain on the existing infrastructure. The Cabinet while passing the decision has obviously overlooked these

observations.

The never-ending inward migration to Delhi, while it spurred economic activity, it also undoubtedly added to the environmental despairs. Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal would not say it, nor did older leaders like Har Kishan Lal Bhagat, Madanlal Khurana or Sahib Singh Verma dared to speak against migration as it would have amounted to political profanity. The only political person to stand-up and challenge rampant and unplanned urbanisation was Jagmohan, who lost his job as urban development minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government for being “too rigid” in the matter.

Leaders right from Congress strongman HKL Bhagat to BJP studs Madanlal Khurana and Sahib Singh Verma to Outer Delhi’s several term MP Sajjan Kumar and many lesser political individuals have been involved in getting these colonies first raised and then authorized and have reaped rich political harvest out of it.

This time too, war of words has already broken out between the BJP and the Aam Aadmi Party over taking credit for the move. Union Minister for Urban Development Hardeep Singh Puri, while making the announcement, slammed the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party government for the delaying tactics. Puri claimed that the Centre decided to “take the initiative when it became clear that the Delhi government will do nothing.” On the other hand, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has claimed that the Union Cabinet prepared road map based on the proposal sent by the Delhi Government in July.

Who gets the credit, whom would the voters of these colonies reward for their respective investment, only time would say but for now the race for taking the credit has become pretty grim.

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