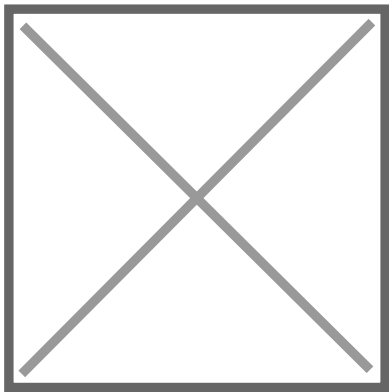




Allocating Residential Plots to Journalists: Balancing Fairness and Public Interest

Description

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A transparent, equitable policy ensures journalists receive essential housing without compromising constitutional principles or public welfare.

Equity in resource allocation aligns with constitutional values, transforming challenges into opportunities for sustainable governance.

Hyderabad: The Supreme Court’s recent judgment on the controversial land allotment policies of Telangana Government offers a significant opportunity to reflect on how public resources are managed. At the heart of the case lay allegations that urban land parcels within Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC), meant to support various groups including Members of Parliament, legislators, journalists, judges, and government employees, were distributed in a manner that blatantly violated principles of fairness and equality.

The policies, codified in several Government Orders (GoMs), were meant to address the housing needs of diverse groups. However, their implementation raised troubling concerns. Land parcels were allotted at prices far below the prevailing market value, with eligibility restrictions ignored or significantly relaxed. These policies benefitted individuals who were already affluent or well-established, allowing them to secure valuable land parcels at steep discounted rates while the truly deserving were left out.

The Supreme Court quashed the allotments, holding that they violated Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law. It also highlighted that such actions betrayed public trust by treating land, a vital public resource, as largesse to be distributed without regard for public interest. While the judgment underlines the importance of equitable and transparent policies, it also opens the door for thoughtful solutions that address genuine housing needs while aligning with constitutional principles.

One such group deserving targeted support is journalists. In a democracy like India, journalists play a vital role as watchdogs of power, often working under significant financial constraints. Their housing

needs should be met, but without repeating the mistakes of recent and past policies. This is where a balanced alternative approach could be considered by the state government, one that honours fairness while ensuring state resources are managed responsibly.

Thoughtful Solution

The thoughtful solution would involve setting a reasonable pricing mechanism. To ensure the housing plots remain affordable without becoming a giveaway, the state government can set the base price at least 25% below the prevailing market rate. This discount would offer a fair opportunity for journalists to acquire housing without depleting state resources. In recognition of the vital societal role played by journalists, the state could offer them an additional 5-10% discount on this base price, reflecting their contributions to democracy and the challenges they face in an increasingly precarious industry.

To make the process more feasible for journalists, the payment structure should be flexible. One way to do this would be to allow payment in three instalments: an initial payment of 20% to secure the plot, a subsequent 30% after a fixed period, and the remaining 50% once basic infrastructure like roads, water, and electricity is developed. This approach would ease the financial burden on journalists while ensuring the government receives a substantial portion of the market value over time.

Revenue to Government

The thoughtful solution offers a financially prudent alternative for the state government to allocate land to journalist societies while generating significant revenue. Recent and past allocations of 70 acres of prime land to journalist societies were made at heavily discounted rates, effectively giving away assets valued at a minimum of ₹1,400 crores. This approach fails to uphold public interest by undervaluing public resources.

Under the new plan, the government would allocate these lands at a 30% discount to market value, which would still attract significant interest from journalists while ensuring fairness. At this pricing, the state could generate over ₹1,100 crores from the same land. This represents a significant improvement over past giveaways, enabling the government to recoup a substantial portion of the land's value. The revenue generated could be reinvested into infrastructure, public welfare programs, or other development initiatives, aligning with broader public interest. This model balances affordability for journalists and fiscal responsibility, transforming a potential financial loss into a revenue-generating opportunity, all while maintaining legal and ethical transparency in resource allocation.

Future Allocations

The government should start by identifying land near the Outer Ring Road (ORR) exits. This area offers ideal potential for housing developments as it provides excellent connectivity while avoiding the challenges of scarcity and inflated prices found in central urban areas. By carefully selecting locations that balance accessibility and affordability, the government can take the first step toward an equitable plan.

For future allocations, the government should ensure that each house plot is a minimum size of 150 to 200 square yards, providing sufficient space for comfortable housing. The land identified near Outer Ring Road (ORR) exits offers excellent potential for development due to its connectivity and relatively moderate land prices compared to central urban areas. By pricing these plots within a market range of

â?125-40 lakhs and offering discounts to bring the final price to â?17-30 lakhs, the government can make them more affordable for journalists. This approach not only meets the housing needs of the journalists but also ensures that the journalists earn an immediate return of at least 25% from the discounted price.

Addressing Concerns

The thoughtful plan would address multiple concerns. First, it ensures that journalists receive a fair opportunity to secure housing, reflecting their hard work and societal importance. Second, it aligns with constitutional principles by treating journalists equitably while avoiding undue favouritism. Third, it creates a revenue stream for the government, allowing it to recover significant funds rather than offering plots at token rates. Finally, it would be legally defensible, as journalists would be paying a substantial portion of the market value, thus reducing the risk of challenges under Article 14.

By adopting this model, the government can balance the dual objectives of supporting journalists and safeguarding public interest. It ensures that public land, a precious and finite resource, is allocated thoughtfully and fairly, while also demonstrating fiscal responsibility. Moreover, the approach encourages transparency and accountability, critical in restoring public trust after the controversies surrounding past land allotments.

Ultimately, this reimagined plan is a step toward complying with the Article 14. It meets the legitimate housing needs of journalists without compromising the principles of equity or burdening state resources. As urban land becomes increasingly scarce, policies like these set a vital precedent, showing how governments can support journalists while maintaining their commitment to the broader public good. In doing so, the state government not only resolves an immediate issue but also establishes a model for thoughtful, equitable, and sustainable policymaking.

Category

1. Editorial

Date Created

March 15, 2025

Author

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