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# Slum rehab builders a front for city's politicians

Shanties Are Not Just Vote-Banks, But Also Note-Banks

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**Mumbai:** What do the son of a leading state minister, an MLA-turned-builder from the western suburbs, a former housing minister, the son-in-law of a deceased politician, and a senior party leader from Chembur have in common? Each of them has financial stakes in slum redevelopment schemes on public land in Mumbai.

When the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (Mhada) recently stopped builders from redeveloping slums encroached on its lands, many city politicians vehemently protested, saying that poor slum dwellers would be denied low-cost housing.

Mhada still has 120 encroached plots spread over 312 acres in prime areas of the city. The Mhada chief, T Chandrashekhar, had indicated that the authority could redevelop the land itself and earn over Rs 10,000 crore instead of allowing private developers to rake in the moolah.

On the face of it, the fear of the politicians seemed justified and their concern genuine. So much so that chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh had to divest the Mhada vice-president of the charge of slum rehabilitation on Wednesday on the grounds that he was seen to be rais-

ing the prices of flats meant for public housing.

However, according to highly placed government sources, the fear that public housing would get expensive under the new model was a mere bogey created by many of Mumbai's leading politicians—who include elected representatives across party lines. Their real interest lies in the fact that several of the builders who have applied to Mhada for these redevelopment schemes are their frontmen.

## HOUSING SCAM

"Slums are not just about vote-banks, but note-banks for these unscrupulous politicians," said a senior official, not keen to be identified. According to him, most such plots have been cornered over a long period using a common modus operandi.

"Usually, an MLA or corporator lets his cronies encroach a Mhada plot by setting up a few shanties. Soon, a frontman of the elected representative approaches Mhada officers for permission to redevelop the slum. The scheme is submitted to the Slum Rehabilitation Authority and then the Mhada board gives a no-objection certificate," explained a source.

The plan is considered fool-proof:

"The plot is free of cost, the title of the land is clear since it belongs to Mhada and to top it, the builder gets a floor space index of 2.5 to build both residential and commercial space after rehousing slum dwellers free of cost," said the source.

It is learnt that as soon as Mhada issues a letter of intent, the politician sells the development rights to the builder and gets out of the project. One such Mhada plot, encroached with slums, was sold by a Congress politician to a notorious builder, who in turn sold the land to another builder for a few thousand crores. The housing authority did not earn a single rupee from the entire deal.

Such is the nexus between many of Mumbai's politicians and the land mafia that despite innumerable complaints of corruption and intimidation of slum dwellers, the DF government has done little to review this controversial scheme.

The government-appointed S S Tinaikar committee in 2001 too was scathing in its observation on the slum policy. "The government has inflicted a highly iniquitous social policy, which is oriented to confer special favour of a 225 sq ft apartment on those who have encroached and squatted on public lands," it said.

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