

The problem of land hoarding

The government owns more land than it admits, large swathes of which are unused or underutilised



RAM SINGH

The Centre, by its own admission, does not know exactly how much property it owns. Imagine what would happen if a citizen or a private entity made such a claim before the taxman – they would be fined and very likely end up in jail. The actual size and value of government-owned land resources is thus a matter of speculation. The information provided by the Government Land Information System (GLIS) is both incomplete and patchy. While various Central Ministries admit to owning only about 13,50,500 hectares of land, disparate official sources suggest that the correct figure is several times more than what is disclosed.

The problem of unused land
What is worse is that a large proportion of government land lies unused. The Ministries of Railways and Defence, respectively, have 43,000 hectares and 32,780 hectares of land lying vacant, without even any proposed use. According to reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), the 13 major port trusts have 14,728 hectares of land lying idle.

These numbers are staggering, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. They exclude several departments of the Centre and, more importantly, don't take into account excess land holding by the States. What is really unfortunate is that a large part of the unused land is high-value property in prime areas in major cities.

Land hoarding by government agencies has created artificial scarcity and is one of the main drivers of skyrocketing urban real estate prices. Even after the recent correction in property prices, middle- and lower-income households find adequate housing unaffordable. High land prices also reduce competitiveness by increasing the cost of industrial and development projects.

Moreover, the allocation of unused land is rife with corruption. Scams involving the Adarsh Cooperative Housing Society, the Srinagar air-



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

field project, and the Kandla Port Trust are a few of the many examples of alleged complicity between private developers and local officials to misuse government land. At the State level too, instances abound of public land being resold to private entities in dubious deals.

The CAG also reports that none of the government agencies maintains adequate ownership records. For instance, the 13 major ports have failed to produce title deeds for as much as 45% of their land holdings. This makes squatters difficult to evict, and so they gravitate to these areas.

Land use patterns

Land is a crucial and often constraining input for production, not only in agriculture but also in secondary and tertiary sectors. The problem of land scarcity has been aggravated by grossly wasteful land use by government agencies. While stock of land is fixed, its supply as an input in production is not – it crucially depends on land use patterns. A useful measure of this is the floor space index (FSI), which is the total floor area built per square metre of land. For example, if a single-storey building occupies 50% of a plot, the FSI would be 1/2. If the building is expanded vertically to have four stories, the FSI will go up to two (4 times 1/2), as the effective floor area has quadrupled.

The demand for land increases with both population density and economic growth. Therefore, to maintain efficiency, the FSI should also increase. By this token, the FSI

should be the highest in major city centres, where the demand for space is highest, and it should taper off gradually towards the periphery. Apart from supplying space for economic activities, such an arrangement would also help maximise the gains from transport infrastructure.

However, most Indian cities defy these basic tenets of urban planning. The main reason is the large areas of unused or underutilised government land with an irresponsibly low FSI. Residential zones in Lutynys' Delhi and Nungambakkam in Chennai are examples of this gross underutilisation of land. Other cities don't fare much better. The problem is most acute in government residences and office locales. Indian metros thus have the lowest FSI compared to those in other developing countries with similar population densities. The FSI in Shanghai is four times that of Delhi and Mumbai. Moreover, the investment per square metre of land in Indian cities is very low and haphazard. This is a pity as solving the problem of wastage could generate employment and pull masses out of poverty, thereby aiding the economy to grow fast.

People have the right to know the size and use of land holding by government agencies, since most of the official land has been acquired from them by paying pittance by way of compensation. It is because of this subsidy that government agencies, and in many cases private companies, have been able to amass large stocks of unused land. For instance,

another report by the CAG on Special Economic Zones shows that as much as 31,886 hectares, or 53% of the total land acquired by the government for these zones, remains unused – land which would have been put to more productive use by its original owners.

In a welcome initiative, the Centre has asked departments to identify surplus land. Unfortunately, agencies seem to be loathe to cooperate.

The need of the hour is a comprehensive inventory of land resources and usage patterns for all government branches. It should include information on the location of each property, its dimensions, the legal title, current and planned use, and any applicable land use restrictions. This will enable effective identification of suboptimal land use, as well as of the land that is surplus.

The use of surplus land

Surplus land should be utilised to meet the ever-growing demands for services, such as water and waste disposal, as well for government-sponsored housing and transportation projects. It is crucial to avoid the temptation to sell surplus land as excessive acquisition of land may become the norm and unwilling sellers are typically under-compensated. Land intended for future use can be rented out till such time it is needed, through a transparent auctioning process. This will not only buoy the public exchequer but prevent plots of land lying waste for years.

The problem of inefficient land use by government departments and public sector units is complicated and endemic. Correcting such inefficiency is no mean feat. However, given the importance of land for the country, we need to be creative in finding solutions. A public-governments partnership seems to be the way out. We could take a cue from Britain. There, the government has pledged to provide details of ownership, location, and intended use for all properties. Citizens are invited to contest official land use and suggest alternatives.

Therefore, as a first step, the government should agree to disclose its land use and release of excess land, the use of which it cannot justify.

Ram Singh is Professor, Delhi School of Economics

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Dividends of arguments

Self-regulation enables the media to continuously reflect on the craft of journalism



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

A young lawyer wanted me to explain why I preferred self-regulation to statutory regulation for the media. He was deeply worried about the state of broadcast journalism, and most of his examples of irresponsible behaviour of the fourth estate were prime-time broadcasts over the last couple of years. He pointed out instances of victim blaming, trial by media, and scant respect for facts.

There is a missing element in his argument. The idea of self-regulation, as refined and modified subtly by the Leveson Inquiry in Britain, and which I agree with, is not devoid of any statutory underpinning. In what way statutory underpinning is vastly different from state control, censorship, and propaganda models has been explained in many scholarly papers since Leveson's recommendation.

The scope of self-regulation

Self-regulation goes beyond the statutory arrangement by having a mechanism for continuous reflection on the craft of journalism. This arrangement is not restricted to ensuring fairness and accuracy in reportage alone; it also actively provides a platform for both readers and journalists of this newspaper to wrestle with a range of dilemmas. A newspaper does not just provide credible information; inquisitiveness, reading pleasure and visual subtlety by the Leveson Inquiry in Britain, and which I agree with, is not devoid of any statutory underpinning. In what way statutory underpinning is vastly different from state control, censorship, and propaganda models has been explained in many scholarly papers since Leveson's recommendation.

These additional layers of self-regulation work only when we have both questioning readers and a responsive editorial team. One of the issues that poses an additional burden on good journalism is the contested aspect of our history. For instance, thinking about why the newspaper referred to the place of recent protest in two different ways: Bhima-Koregaon and Koregaon-Bhima. The journalists who handled these sensitive reports had a clear answer. Koregaon-Bhima is the official name of the village as per the Census, and that is what this newspaper uses when referring to just the place. But the bat-

tle between the British East India Company and the Peshwa's army 200 years ago was fought on the banks of the Bhima, and is referred to as the Battle of Bhima-Koregaon.

Criticism is not seen as a flood that washes away everything in its path when the sluice gates are opened. What I have witnessed over the past six years is that journalists – reporters and the desk – in this newspaper absorb and internalise diverse criticism and evolve the standards of journalism. For instance, when I flagged the unintended consequences of literary allusions in headlines in "Do literary allusions hurt?" (Jan. 1, 2018), the Weekend Sport desk not only deliberated the issue threadbare but also explained how they came up with the headline "Into the Heart of Darkness".

Giving headlines

The darkness in Joseph Conrad's novel is about a range of disconcerting questions and the desk felt it captured the nagging questions that confront the Indian cricket team. The novel's title helped to invert racism to hint at South Africa's own apartheid experiences. The desk was aware of China Achebe's criticism and the theory of interpretation of text. The team said that the author of a headline cannot limit the text's meaning just to his or her own original intention. It referred to Derrida: "A text... is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed within its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces."

The desk took care to separate the geographical region, South Africa, which was dealt with in a different story on the page titled "Lay of the land" that gave the various evolutions of this fixture. However, the main story dealt with the mental preparation of the team and the fear in its mind given its dismal record in South Africa. The team felt that "Into the Heart of Darkness" was evocative enough to bring out a range of issues.

The column irked one of the readers. He felt that instead of questioning whether the headline was relevant to the content, or whether the two matched, the column chose to mention a host of literary stalwarts. The challenge was not a routine journalistic one, but one that flows from literary allusions. An excursion into literature was thus inevitable.

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

SINGLE FILE

A sum of contributions

Routine engagement of the States is crucial to India's climate action commitments

APARNA ROY



The Emissions Gap Report 2017, released last year ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference, underlined that fulfilment of national pledges related to carbon emission reductions under the Paris Agreement would be inadequate to keep global warming below 2°C. Thus, a renewed focus on climate governance is imperative.

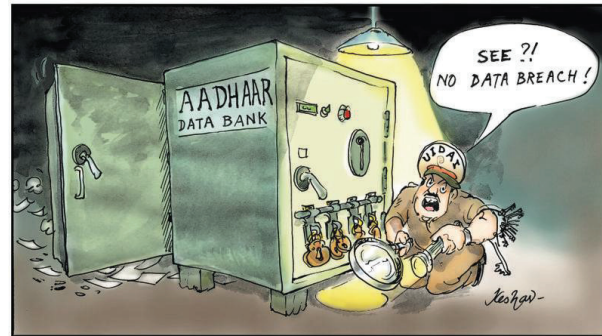
The Talanoa Dialogue of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, beginning this month, will facilitate the parties to take stock of progress post-Paris. As a key player in international climate governance, India could set the precedent in deepening the dialogue process through an action-oriented, inclusive, bottom-up approach, involving extensive participation and collaboration of its States.

In a federal democracy like India, subnational or States are a vital part of the grand coalition between the Centre, civil society, businesses, and key climate stakeholders. India's State Action Plan on Climate Change supports the integration of national climate change goals into subnational policies. India has committed to meet its greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions towards net-zero by 2050, is generating a unique precedent for bold climate leadership, with its member states and regions surpassing 200 in number. Currently, Telangana and Chhattisgarh are signatories to this pact from India, as compared to representations from the other top emitters: 26 subnational governments in China and 24 in the U.S. Greater representation of Indian States is crucial.

It is equally imperative to examine the progress of subnational actions in meeting national climate targets. Towards this end, both national and State plans would need to be periodically reassessed and reviewed. A transparent framework for review, audit and monitoring of GHG emissions is needed. As State capacities vary significantly, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities should be applied to allocate mitigation targets in different States, based on the principle of equity.

States have enormous mitigation potential, but the evidence pertaining to its effectiveness is still scarce. Therefore, India must look towards creating knowledge action networks and partnerships under both national and State action plan frameworks. Kerala has taken the lead to build such a knowledge network funded by the National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change.

Aparna Roy is Associate Fellow at Observer Research Foundation



CONCEPTUAL

Dividend signalling

FINANCE

The shares of companies that raise the amount of dividend they pay to their shareholders each year usually outperform the shares of companies that reduce their dividend. Since investors generally punish the shares of companies that reduce their dividend in successive years, the management of a company which decides to increase its dividend is believed to signal to investors that it is likely to earn sufficiently higher profits in the coming years to fund higher dividends. This positively affects the company's share price as investors become more willing to buy the shares, expecting a rise in profits.

MORE ON THE WEB

Video: Inside the temple of the Toda tribe

<http://bit.ly/todatemp>

SHELF HELP

Different strokes

On books and memoirs that feature works of art

PREETI ZACHARIAH

"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life," said Pablo Picasso. But did artists through history simply have everyday lives? Fiction and memoir based on the lives of many artists indicate otherwise, and their lives are often as fascinating as the art they create.

It was through a slender yellowing book of George Orwell's essays that I was introduced to Spanish surrealist artist, Salvador Dali. This was long ago, but *Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dali* that called Dali's autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, "a strip-tease act conducted in pink limelight" is hard to forget. Ever since that essay, it is not his best known *The Persistence of Memory* that I associate with Dali but *Rainy Taxi*. The three-dimensional artwork created out of an

actual car and two mannequins depicts a chauffeur with a shark head in the front seat and a dead woman over whose "already somewhat bloated face and breast of the apparently dead girl, huge snails were crawling," writes Orwell. "In the caption below the picture Dali notes that these are Burgundy snails – that is, the edible kind."

Some argue that Henrik Ibsen's swansong, *When We Dead Awaken*, is based on the ill-fated romance between Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin. Claudel, who never completely escaped her mentor and lover's shadow and died in an asylum, seems to have inspired Irene, while Professor Rubek, the protagonist, is apparently Rodin. "I was dead for many years. They came and bound me and gave me my arms together behind my back. Then they lowered me into a grave-vault, with

iron bars before the loophole. And with padded walls – so that no one on the earth above could hear the grave-shrieks," Irene tells Rubek. It almost feels like Ibsen, who knew Rodin and wrote the play in 1899, foretold the insanity that would engulf Claudel by the 1900s.

Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, a marvellous play of colour and light, was the inspiration behind Tracy Chevalier's historical novel by the same name. Written in first-person narrative, by 16-year-old Griet who begins work as a maid in the home of the Dutch painter Vermeer and his pregnant wife Catharina, the story traces the years she spends in that household. She soon begins to assist the painter in his studio much to his wife's annoyance and goes on to pose for him, which leads to her expulsion from the household.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 8, 1968

Changes in bank boards may affect deposits

In anticipation of Parliament adopting legislation in its next session for the so-called social control of banks, most commercial banks have been making changes at the top and in their boards of directors. This follows Mr. Morarji Desai's advice that in many months ago that the banks need not await the passage of the legislation for making changes in their boards. Wherever bank chairmen were industrialists they have resigned and in most cases the General Managers of the banks have been elevated to the posts of Chairmen in consultation with the Union Finance Ministry.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 8, 1918.

Tin Plates and Oil Tins.

At the request of the Ministry of Munition and in order to decrease the exports of tin plates from the United Kingdom, the various oil companies in India agreed in January, 1917, to endeavour to substitute as far as possible sales of oil in bulk for sales in tins. With this end in view as a temporary war measure the price of all tins was increased in January 1917 by ten annas per two tin, the price of oil not in tins remaining the same. The prolongation of the war has rendered necessary further measures in the direction already taken, and in view of the increased cost of the production of tins and the fact that the price of old tins is approaching, if it has not already exceeded, the price of new tins, the price of oil in tins will now be advanced by a further increase of 8 annas per two tin unit.

DATA POINT

More medical colleges

The government has received applications for establishing 85 new medical colleges for the academic year 2018-19. A look at the State-wise location of the 479 existing medical colleges, both private and government, as of January 1, 2018.

