

Activists demand more clarity in land allotments

MT Saju | TNN

Chennai: AICC president Sonia Gandhi's exhortation to chief ministers at the Congress plenary session to abolish the government discretionary power to allocate land has triggered a debate and brought back under the spotlight the recent allegations that the DMK government had misused the Government Discretionary Quota (GDQ) to favour politicians, bureaucrats and those close to chief minister M Karunanidhi while allocating housing plots. Although the order of allotment under the GDQ clearly mentions the eligibility of the person, the discretionary power of the chief minister prevails.

Says M G Devasahayam, retired IAS officer: "Discretion can't be arbitrary. The dates for application for the GDQ will always be a tricky affair. In many cases, people who are eligible for GDQ are not aware of the dates, which as per the rule should be published in a local newspaper. So there is strict violation of the rules and regulations. Since the discretionary power vests with the chief minister, the power of the officer appointed to monitor the functioning of the selection process will be overlooked."

Whether it is the DMK or the AIADMK, successive regimes have exercised their discretionary powers to favour those close to them. Activists point out that the GDQ could be misused using government orders, like the one passed in 2001, which lifted the restrictions on unsold plots in that period. "After the draw, if any plot or flat remained unsold, it can be allotted on a first-come first-served basis. With the misuse of 2001 order and the subsequent relaxation, the number of applications naturally increased. Citing increase in applications as a reason, the government increased GDQ from 10% to 15%. In most cases, the relevant documents are not submitted. There are cases in which even four people in a family got plots under the GDQ," points V Gopalakrishnan, of Fact, an

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NGO based in Chennai, whose RTI applications helped bring to light recently the alleged misuse of the discretionary quota.

Some of the eligible categories under the GDQ are single women, social workers, physically handicapped persons, defense personnel, senior citizens, state government servants and journalists. However, terms like 'social worker' are not defined properly, "A social worker must get a certificate from the NGO he/she is working with. But in many cases, plots have been issued to people close to politicians under this tag," says Gopalakrishnan.

Once the GDQ is issued, the divisional officer will send a provisional order to the person concerned, asking him to pay the initial amount within 21 days. Income and eligibility certificates should also be produced. "If the discretion does not fit into the larger interest of the public then what is the use of the very concept?" asks retired DGP S P Mathur. "Land scams are the biggest in India. So it is high time we made all transactions transparent and online. If it is available online, then public can see this and will get a clear idea what's happening," he says.

Although people like Gopalakrishnan demand 'abolition of GDQ', there are some who don't favour this. "The GDQ will be useful for many people provided it is used in the right way. There must be a screening committee to monitor the selection process," suggests Devasahayam.