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## Pune farmers wheel and deal in land at jet-set speed

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PUNE: These days residents of remote and sleepy villages in drought prone talukas of Ahmednagar are witnessing an increasing number of vehicles with registrations MH-12 zipping in and out. The Pune-registered cars aren't in the state's largest district for sight seeing; but to buy land - agricultural, cultivable land at high prices.

Actress Rani Mukherjee's tryst with buying land near Shirdi (also in Ahmednagar) may have run into problems, but that isn't discouraging farmers from Pune who have collected large amount of money after selling their lands in and around Pune to real estate developers, special economic zones, industries and others.

These farmers are making a beeline to places such as Karjat, Shrigonda, Parner, Shirur, Daund and Baramati to buy farmlands. Many of these farmers have gained from skyrocketing prices - in places like Wagholi, Hadapsar and Hinjewadi, the going rate is about Rs 1 crore to Rs 3 crore per acre and even more. By selling one guntha of land (40 gunthas make one acre) in Pune, one can buy a few acres in villages located about 70 to 80 km from the city, where the rates range from Rs 1 to 8 lakh per acre.

This buying spurt fuelled by the neo-rich Pune farmers has led to a sharp increase in farmland prices in parts of Ahmednagar district. The issue has raised the concerns of elected representatives from these areas, who have been raising the matter in various public fora. Forest minister, Baban Pachpute, who hails from Shrigonda, has been quite vocal against this trend. However, he wasn't available for comment as he is away in China.

The demand for arable land is ironical. Although, Ahmednagar district pioneered the co-operative sugar movement in Maharashtra, it is essentially drought prone, with rainfall ranging between 500 to 600 mm in a year. Parner, Shrigonda and Karjat are not only drought prone, but have also witnessed famines.

However, the recently-completed Chaskman and Kukdi river projects and few canal networks have made the area well irrigated. The area also fits the requirements of most Pune farmers who want big chunks of irrigated lands at one place at lower rates. "Being drought prone, the population density in these talukas has been low with migration to cities being a major factor," said one assistant agricultural officer from the area. "Consequently land holding has been higher," he added.

As a result, prices of unirrigated lands which were in the range of Rs 10 to 25,000 per acre, have now shot up to Rs 1 to 2 lakh per acre. All this rise in price has taken place in less than a year's time. "I purchased 40 acres of land at the rate of Rs 71,000 per acre in a village in Karjat taluka about seven months ago," said a Pune-based businessman who didn't want to be quoted. "Immediately after that, the prices started increasing. Now they are in the range of a few lakh rupees per acre."

These farmers, usually, prefer to buy more than 10 acres of land. For better bargain, the sellers prefer to come together in groups and pull together about 50 to 100 acres of land for sale. "In the last six months, I have done deals for nine such groups in Daund, Baramati and Karjat," said a dealer, who didn't want to be named.

The talathis and tehsildars or government officials, from three districts of Ahmednagar also confirmed the hectic buying by Pune farmers. The sub-registrar's office (SRO), where the property deals have to be registered, told ET that these days at least two to three Pune farmers come every week for property registrations at the SRO offices. The new absentee landlords, either keep the land fallow or cultivate cash crops like sugarcane. "The area under horticulture crops like pomegranates and grapes has started increasing," said, district agricultural officer, Ahmednagar, Vikas Patil.

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