



Navin M Raheja, MD, Raheja Developers

Value added

Super luxe residential projects, SEZ plans notwithstanding, Navin M Raheja is now determined to help his labourers

Any person using the word 'responsibility' is often viewed with scepticism. But Navin Raheja's concerns are genuine and what he has to tell you is alarming to say the least. "When it comes to the labourers - five to six workers die on an average in a big project. It's usually hushed up." The solution is simple. One has to just put a netting around the highrises being built. "How much does it cost? Not even .5 per cent of your budget. Can't one spend this minuscule amount to safeguard the lives of these labourers?"

Raheja's company, Raheja Developers, takes measures for labour safety by providing a netting around their buildings. "It also makes the area around look better. This is the statutory requirement in foreign countries, so we imported these nets hoping that others will follow suit and I am glad to tell you many others are doing so," he says. Ask Navin Raheja about his company's USP and you get to hear a lot about energy-efficient buildings and water recycling, but this is a man who is also very concerned about the labourers working on his projects. "They are not getting their dues. I have faced a lot of resistance from my contractors

complete water recycling and does not allow waste water to flow into the system. Soundproof buildings - a UK-based company offered them sealed double-glazed windows - make for more energy-efficient structures that cut air-condition costs. "We can only improve as we go along," says Raheja, referring to his upcoming projects in Gurgaon, namely Atharva, Vedaanta, Navodaya and Raisina Residency (with Tata housing).

Here too, he talks about value systems being put in place. "We're about good housing, good commercial projects, and at a good price. Clubhouses, pools, imported fittings - We give value."

The prices are kept competitive on cost-plus basis and not on market variables. "That is why we force the market to contain the prices. We don't base our construction on the premise that higher costs make better apartments. Depending on what we have invested in the property and working out a reasonable margin of profit, we are determined to give value for the price we are asking for," he says.

Down with speculation: Raheja also wants to put a complete end to this business of speculation. The focus is only on end users. Those looking purely for investment options are not allowed in. "We have a system, a department which scrutinises and controls the application process. Asking for PAN number, passport number, permanent address proof eliminates bogus applicants. We don't allow more than one apartment per family in our projects. I give permission in special cases and even then - supposing there are two brothers in a family and they want

It's a hard life for labourers. Are their interests compromised?

By Indrani Thakurata

A luxury apartment worth crores... Built through backbreaking labour worth a few paltry rupees. Ever wondered about the labourers - the people who, brick by brick, build those luxury multi-storey residential complexes or commercial buildings?

The contrasts are stark when you visit a premium residential project. One moment you are being ushered into the plush dining area of a sample flat and the next you are outdoors staring at a labourer couple sharing a frugal lunch. What do they feel about their poverty and the buildings worth crores that they are setting up? Says Usha from Jhansi in Madhya Pradesh: "No, it doesn't hurt to build a home for others, even if we have no roof over our heads. We are only concerned about the Rs 20,000 that we earn after a year of work."

The growing construction industry, a natural corollary to the surge in urbanisation, is the second largest employer in India today, next only to agriculture. Lack of opportunities in the rural areas draw thousands of people from rural and semi-rural areas towards the bright city lights. The construction industry absorbs a large part of this migrant labour force. Yet, the lives of Usha and her co workers, cementing, at the moment, the base for a high-end residential project in Sector 50, Gurgaon, is far from satisfactory. At the mercy of the contractors, they are mostly taken for a ride. A skilled labourer should get Rs 200 for eight hours - the minimum wage. But as Ratanlal from Rohtak, working at a site, explains, "We have three kinds of workers here in the A, B, C category. For eight hours of work, A category gets Rs 180, B gets Rs 150 and C gets Rs 135."

Then there are the safety issues. "Site work is always dangerous, but we make sure that the labourers follow safety norms like wearing boots, helmets and jackets. And in case of any mishap the workers are adequately compensated."