

June 2022

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Recommended Citation

Mitra, Soma; Sarangi, Dhananjaya; Bhanj, Rajendra Col.; and Patnaik, Srikanta (2022) "Social, Ethical & Legal aspect of RWA (Resident Welfare Association) Management," *Interscience Management Review*. Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: 10.47893/IMR.2022.1130

Available at: <https://www.interscience.in/imr/vol5/iss2/5>

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Social, Ethical & Legal aspects of RWA (Resident Welfare Association) Management

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Abstract:

There has been a sharp rise in the number of highrise buildings in almost all cities during the last 10 years and particularly after the declaration of “Smart Cities” by Government of India. So far as the business and management of infrastructure companies are concerned, it is needless to say that it is an established industry. However, after these high rise buildings become habitable, and are handed over to the housing societies or Resident Welfare Associations (Hereafter referred as RWAs), there are many issues and challenges faced by the apartment owners. The motivation behind the study of social, ethical and legal aspect of RWAs/Housing Societies of India is therefore taken up, and we have carried out some study while managing a society from its day-one management.

As on date, RWA management is a complex subject as it covers Security, Hospitality, Soft Services, Support Services, House Keeping, and Technical Services such as Lift, Electrical Power and Pest Control Management Services. In fact, these facilities have to be managed with a fixed annual budget, collected through Common Area Maintenance (CAM) charges from all the residents. Many of us have the

misconception that managing the society within the stipulated CAM (Common Area Maintenance) charges is the only challenge faced by the RWA office bearers, as collection of service charges are always a challenging issue. However, almost all of us forget to abide by the statutory compliances such as Minimum wages, ESI, EPF and GST rules of the government notified from time to time. In addition RWA should follow the norm of City Development Authority, Fire Safety Department, State Pollution Control Board and other statutory bodies, who issue the compliance certificates for the facilities available in the premises after due inspection, which is a mandatory requirement for community living. Therefore, we have made an attempt to highlight this area, so that more study can be carried out and we can have a better living.

Keywords: Smart Cities, Resident Welfare Associations(RWA), RWA formation, Common Area Maintenance(CAM), Organogram of RWAs, Social Aspects, Ethical Dilemmas and Legal Aspects.

1. Introduction

Many studies have been carried out for the housing societies for the EWS (Economically Weaker Section of the Society) ^[1] and their issues and problems, as

these are the government sponsored projects and issues vary. However, very little work has been taken up for the housing societies/RWAs of these modern era smart cities.

According to a survey carried out by Shodhganga ^[2], which is a reservoir of Research Thesis maintained by University Grant Commission of India, the number of registered co-operative housing societies in India has increased from roughly 5,500 in 1960 to more than 5,00,000 by the end of 2015. Secondly, Government of India has started the Smart Cities Mission in 2015, by which various kinds of efforts and planning were initiated by many Indian State governments, which led to increase in the number of high rise buildings and RWAs in India ^[3]. Further, Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India has come up with a new law for the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act in 2016 and by this, housing societies are now governed by the new Apartment Owners Act ^[4]. A study reports that the worth of housing infrastructure has reached more than Rs. 80,000 Crores in 2021 ^[5]. This led to the massive increase in the number of RWA managements over the last couple of years. However, the trained man power are not available in the market for the smooth management of these housing societies. This sector is presently fragmented and unorganised and run by small operators, which is becoming a challenge for the associations in the smooth running of the societies.

Motivation for studying Management of RWAs

There is a policy by the Central Government encouraging Smart Cities to come up, which in turn encourage high-rise buildings and community living. Secondly, Employment and Labour Laws have changed due to which all the RWAs are required to follow the minimum wages policy ^[5]. RWAs are now a potential source of employment generation. Further, due to the technology changes, RWAs are now implementing high-tech equipment such as high rise elevators, Sewerage Treatment plants and Green Energy Management and are also connected to the Smart city inclusive governance ^[4]. Though this sector is now unorganised, the volume of manpower requirement is growing exponentially year after year, and it is imperative to study the manpower management of RWAs for enhancing the present living standard of community living.

Section 2 of this paper covers the RWA formation and its internal structure. Section 3 covers the issues and challenges of the RWAs. Social aspect of RWAs has been covered in Section 4. Section 5 covers the dilemmas and trade-offs arising out of ethical issues. Section 6 highlights the legal framework of the country for the RWAs and associated organisations. And Section 7 covers the conclusions and future direction.

2. Structure of Resident Welfare Association:

During the couple of years, there has been a paradigm shift with respect to the building

structure, high tech equipment, sophisticated engineering systems in the high rise apartment/ urban housing societies, such as green energy harvesting, waste material recycling etc. As RWAs are evolving in these high rises building, there is no such bench marking or standard guideline for operation. While taking over the maintenance from the builders, initial period of 4-5 years are very troublesome and there ensues a blame game among various groups among RWA members. After a couple of stormy tenures, some of RWAs are learning from their mistakes. However, in many cases they struggle to find the right path for better management.

Usually, RWAs are managed by an elected body namely Governing Board/ Executive Committee/ Board of managers etc., which serve for a stipulated period of one/ two / three years depending upon the local government guidelines.^[7] The structure of the RWAs is Office Bearers and Executive Committee Members. Office Bearers who are responsible for the day-to-day management of the RWAs consist of President, Vice-President, Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer. However, the role and responsibility of the Executive Committee Members are not well defined in any of the local government guidelines.

We have taken a survey of some of the high rise apartments in the city of Bhubaneswar and listed some of their concerns related to the elected executive body of the society^[8]. It is strongly felt that the Executive Committee members should be able to shoulder the responsibility of

various functions of the RWAs. The following is a suggested structure for the smooth functioning of the RWAs.

Office Bearers:

1. President: He is the Chief Executive of the RWA. He shall deal with external agencies including communication with various government departments. He is also responsible for any legal issues in that he shall sue and be sued.^[7]

2. Vice-President: He shall perform the duties of President in his absence or as directed by President.^[8]

3. Secretary: He is in charge of general administration and day-to-day functioning of the RWA. He is the record keeper^[7] of the RWA and it falls upon him to organise meetings and record meetings.

4. Joint Secretary: He shall perform the duty of secretary^[7] in his absence or as directed by Secretary. He may look after the cultural and club activities.

5. Treasurer: He is the custodian of the accounts and is responsible for the annual audit and IT return.^[8]

As there are various statutory compliance and technical issues which need to be addressed internally by the RWAs, residents of the apartment/ condominium should encourage persons with expertise in the field of Electrical engineering, Sanitary and Sewerage engineering,^[7] Legal profession, Finance and Accounting etc. to be members of the executive body. These members of executive body having domain expertises should be willing to contribute to the development and smooth running of the society.

Executive Committee of an Ideal RWA

1. Member – Security, Internal Discipline, Fire & Safety
2. Member – Engineering (Electrical)
3. Member – Engineering (Mechanical & Lift)
4. Member – Engineering (Building & Road)
5. Member – Engineering (Water Supply & Sanitary & Sewerage)
6. Member – Cultural & Club Activity
7. Member – Accounts & Finance
8. Member – Garden & Environment
9. Member – Health & Wellbeing
10. Member – Legal & Statutory Compliances
11. Member – Games & Sports facilities

2.1. Common Area Maintenance (CAM) by RWAs:

Common Area Maintenance (CAM) ^[9] is the primary responsibility of the RWAs and it needs systematic planning and execution in the following verticals. As the member of the executive body are voluntary activities and not full time engagement, RWAs need a dedicated person i.e. Estate Manager for effective management of the property. ^[9] Estate Manager is the pivotal point of the common area maintenance under which different functions of the RWAs operate. ^[10] He in turn reports directly to the President/ Secretary and carries out their instructions.

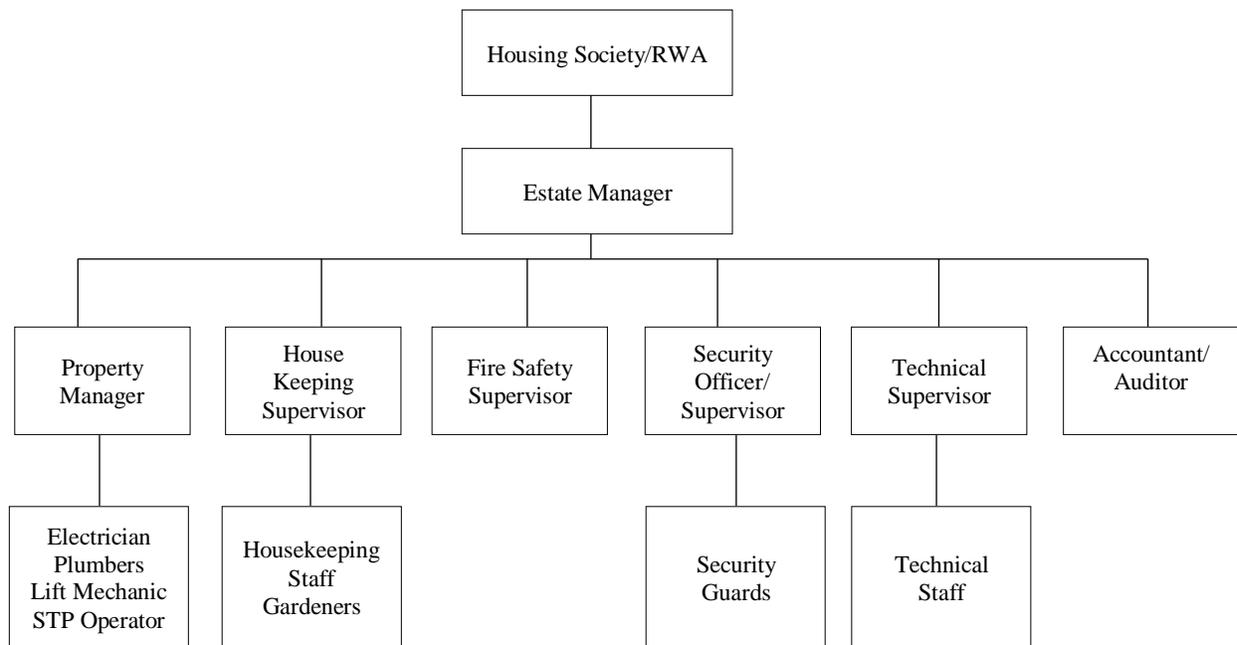


Figure: Typical Organogram of RWAs

A study reports that the total manpower engaged in various RWAs in the country is more than 3 crores ^[10] as on date. However, out of this major chunk of the manpower are untrained and they have limited knowledge

about the job they are undertaking. Even the trained manpower for one sector of the facility management requires an additional dose of training, whenever deployed in

RWAs, as they have to deal with new equipment and machines.

3. Issues & Challenges of RWA Management

As RWA management is evolving at present, there are numerous issues and challenges faced by the RWAs. They are enumerated as below:

1. The Apex body of any society is the Governing Body or Executive Committee or Board of Managers, which is an elected body and the tenure of this elected body usually varies from one year to three years^[11]. Secondly, the elected members volunteer to take up this position in addition to their professional activities and therefore, majority of them spend little time/ no time to understand the nature of problems of RWAs and the complexities involved in it. On the other hand, the flat owners of any RWA expect maximum services with minimum contributions.
2. The statutory policies for the high rise apartments are also changing and application of statutory compliance becomes a complex job for RWAs^[10]. It is really difficult to keep track of the changing rules, as this business evolves around the new technology, changing policies and governance.
3. The clientele in this business is also diverse and same facilities of support cannot be extended with fixed charges, i.e. no government can fix

the rate of Common Area Maintenance service charges, except fixing the minimum rate of wages, taxes, and statutory compliances.^[9] Therefore, management of these RWAs becomes more complex in providing quality services to the residents.

4. There are various domains in facility management such as Security, House Keeping, Hospitality, Soft Services, Technical Services, Pest Management Services, Support Services, Cleaning, etc. To recruit the right manpower and train them for different jobs with different clientele is also a complex job.^[11]
5. Communication is another challenge in these high rise building i.e. communication among the residents, communication between the resident and the security gate and communication between the RWA officials and the residents, etc.^[12] For this purpose, RWAs should adopt and implement software for internal communication, which are readily available such as ADDA, Apna Complex, MyGate, Aarvi Real estate Solution, Society Run, Society Maxx, etc.^[12] Such software gives power to the RWAs to be connected to all its residents and secondly, transparency is maintained. However, there are also ethical issues and those should be administered accordingly.

3.1. RWA Management through External Service Provider vs. Direct Recruitment

There are basically two ways of managing facility management services of the RWAs. The first way is take up the facility management by recruiting the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manpower for various services such as security, housekeeping and electrical maintenance and sanitary and sewerage line maintenance and secondly through outsourcing/ engagement of manpower service provider ^[13].

First of all the office of RWAs is managed voluntarily by the residents and the Office Bearers are being changed at regular intervals. Hence, Office Bearer usually do not take the responsibility of recruiting this manpower ^[14] The second challenge of recruiting directly by the RWAs is the fair selection of candidates. And third to maintain the statutory compliances by the RWAs becomes a responsibility on the Office Bearers.

With the rapid growth of High rise condominiums as well as the promotion of the Smart City Project by the Government of India, many companies have been registered in recent past for providing manpower services to ^[13] RWAs and Urban Housing Societies. They are now coming forward to take up the crucial and unavoidable needs of the RWAs. These companies/ agencies work for the RWAs to negotiate with the statutory bodies and run the show in the society. The primary role of these outsourcing companies

is to understand the nature of duty of the operation and thereby supply the best suited services for various needs of the societies.

^[11] Basically, these service provider agencies/ companies job is twofold. Ethically they should cater to the need of the RWAs as well as they follow the norm of the statutory bodies. However, very few service providers follow the norms of the statutory bodies and as a result it becomes a burden on the part of RWAs as they are the Principal Employer.

Except a few potential manpower outsourcing companies who are serving corporate enterprises in India, maximum of them do not have the minimum knowledge of RWA management. Secondly as on date, very few training facilities are available in this domain ^[14]; many RWAs do not realise the need of trained manpower for RWA management.

There is absolutely no research and development activity done so far for this evolving business to understand and serve the current trends in RWA facility management and therefore, they do not get a chance to acquire information about what opportunities are being generated and what types of services they need to provide in future days ^[14], as also the statutory compliances they have to meet in future. Therefore, majority of these facility management companies operating in this domain have entered only as an agency for unskilled and semi skilled manpower provider, without having much knowledge about the statutory compliances, new rules

and regulations of the RWAs issued by the government from time to time.

On the contrary, all these manpower recruitment companies, should take up training programmes specifically for the ^[13] RWA manpower management, to understand the latest operational values as well as the requirement trends of various fields within. As this business is evolving around the notion of Smart City, ^[14] high rise condominium and changing lifestyles of the citizens, no prior knowledge is available with the established business entities and therefore, there is an opportunity available throughout the industry to train and prepare the appropriate manpower as well as for the Research and Development activities^[13].

4. Social Aspect of RWAs

In any apartment/ condominium, RWA's are being created for the better coordination, living style and to maintain harmony among the residents. ^[16] To maintain social harmony is always a priority but not at the cost of discipline.

As the residents occupy their dwelling units in the condominium, various groups of residents start creating various clubs for their hobbies such as Badminton, Basketball, Cards, Cricket, Foot Ball, Cultural, Dance, Music Club, Yoga Club and sometimes special interest groups such as Senior Citizen Forum, Pet Lovers Club, Children Club etc. are also being formed within the condominium. ^[15] During the survey it has been found that these clubs and special interest groups sometimes pose problems for the normal functioning of the

RWAs due to various reasons. They are as follows:

- i) These clubs fight among themselves and also with the RWA functionaries for the use of resources such as club house, play grounds etc., which sometimes pose problem for the RWAs. ^[15]
- ii) As the size of the condominiums become larger, the number of clubs increase and groups become divergent sub groups and the conflict increases for the use of common resources. ^[16]
- iii) Another critical angle of the social issue is that the builder / promoter of the apartment try to control the RWA through some of these clubs and groups by subtly playing one group against the other.

There are many conflicting situations and issues which arise due to the absence of the Standard Operating Procedure of the RWA governance. Secondly, RWA's of the high rise buildings of the smart cities are evolving and there is no clear cut guideline for the RWA governance from the government. ^[15] It is therefore a much needed topic to be studied and there is a need for bench marking guidelines to be framed for the RWAs.

5. Ethical Dilemmas before RWAs and its Remedies

There are quite a number of ethical issues recorded during the survey with various RWA functionaries, which are not black and white in nature and involve dilemmas in

taking a right decision. Some of these instances involving ethical dilemmas are presented here:

- i) **Taking over the Common Area Assets from the Developer:** ^[17] The first ethical dilemma appeared before RWAs, when RWAs started taking over the common area assets/ properties. Almost none of the builder/ promoters hand over the condominium within the stipulated time frame and facilities promised by the builder at the time of booking. Therefore, it is obvious that there will be dissatisfied customers among the residents and they would advocate taking legal action against the builder. ^[18] As the builders are very big corporate houses, it is very difficult on the part of individual buyers to take legal recourse against them. More often than not, the developer/ builder encourages formation of lobbies among the buyers/ residents by unfair means like favours being granted to certain owners who may be or may have been powerful functionaries in the Government or their relatives, who might have helped the builder in obtaining the NOCs and statutory clearances. ^[17] This unhealthy nexus divides the RWA since the builder controls or tries to control/ curb the RWA through pro-builder lobbies and tries its level best to ensure that RWA does not succeed in proceeding legally.
- ii) **Facility Service Provider:** Second ethical dilemma comes for the RWAs at the time of awarding of contract to the

facility service provider. ^[19] Usually residents do not understand the norms, rules and regulations and statutory compliances of the government issued from time to time. ^[19] Rather they are concerned about only cost effective common area maintenance, which becomes terribly difficult for RWAs to make the residents understand about the norms, and statutory compliances. ^[20] Till the time statutory bodies and government departments detect the irregularities and streamline legal issues, these ethical dilemmas will continue to plague. But once a case is filed with the statutory body, it becomes a legal battle for the RWAs, which subsequent Office Bearers have to settle in the court.

- iii) **Common Area Facilities:** There are some common area facilities such as Club House, Garden Area, and Swimming Pool etc., which come under the control of RWAs. ^[21] Usually various club such as Badminton, Cards, Cultural, Dance, Music, as well as Yoga Clubs share the same facilities of the Club house. ^[22] At the same time RWAs earn some revenue by renting out these spaces to the residents for various functions. However, these seem to be no clear demarcation between what a private function is and what passes off as a club activity to promote a private individual. For example any member of one society decides that he must organise a medical camp or a Musical night and expects the RWA to foot the bill. ^[21] Therefore, there has to be a clear cut SOP's which lay down direct

control of RWA and any activity being planned has to be approved by the EC which may or may not deem it private or otherwise.

- iv) **Parking Area Allotment:** It is another area of concern in present day society and will also remain as a critical problem in future. ^[22] There is a trend in the bigger cities to have a car for each member of the family. Therefore, after the 4-5 years of occupancy, each condominium has more vehicles than the allotted space. Usually while allotting the additional parking, there are unethical practices and that need to be addressed by the RWAs.
- v) **Audit and Accounts:** Audit and Accounts is another area of concern for the RWAs. They should and must administer proper accounting system and annual auditing of their accounts. ^[19] RWAs as a matter of principle should discourage unethical practices, which reflect in the accounts and it is reflected in the annual audit.
- vi) **Annual General Body Meeting:** ^[23] It is an ethical practice to hold the Annual General Body meeting at a regular interval i.e. at least twice a year, so that general problems can be discussed and progress can be monitored. ^[24] It is observed that usually members of the Governing Body delay the Annual General Body Meeting, leading to unresolved issues magnifying into major conflict areas.

- vii) **Whistle Blowing:** Whistle blowing ^[25] is another critical ethical issue for the RWAs. As the society will progress ahead, there will be issues and there will be violation of the rules and Standard Operating Procedures issued by the Government departments and statutory bodies. It has been observed that in the initial period of functioning of the newly elected Office Bearers, they ignore the rules of statutory bodies, such as minimum wages of the manpower employed, their EPF/ ESI, filing of GST by the service provider, City Municipality Garbage disposal, Operation of Sewerage Treatment Plant, IT return etc.. Usually in any society, there are whistle blowers and they write to the appropriate bodies, which in turn takes the RWAs to task by seeking explanations/ reasons, thus wasting valuable time and resources in responding. Therefore, this issue has to be seriously addressed and Office Bearers of RWA have to be aware of the pulse of residents and take necessary corrective steps to mitigate dissent, if any.

6. Legal Aspect of RWAs: Statutory Bodies and Compliances

During the last couple of years, high rise apartments/ condominiums are becoming more and more high-tech due to the use of Lifts and elevators, waste disposal and supply of portable water, which becomes an inescapable requirement for community living. ^[8] To maintain the safety and security of the residents, ^[12] Standard Operating

Procedures (SOP) ^[12] are prescribed by the Government for the lift, elevators, waste disposal and supply of portable water. However, there are reports of casualties due to failure of lifts, lack of firefighting facilities etc. The fact remains that all the residents should perceive these requirements and be ready to maintain all these facilities out of their Common Area Maintenance.^[8] Although residents realise the importance of these high tech facilities, they are reluctant to maintain the same through their financial contribution towards maintenance.

^[8] During the last 5 years, government came up with the strict compliances which have been controlled by various statutory bodies. These statutory bodies are:

(i) Fire & Safety Compliances: Director General of Fire & Safety issues “Clearance Certificate” for the Fire & Safety compliances. ^[26] This body Checks the fire and safety facilities at a regular interval of 5 years and then renews the certificates. As bigger and bigger condominiums/ apartments are developed by the builders, norms are also being changed at regular intervals and RWAs should be educated about these changes and follow the norms for ensuing compliances.

(ii) State Pollution Control Board (SPCB): ^[27] SPCB issues certificates of the “Consent to Operate” the Sewerage Treatment Plant for recycling of the waste water. This body was not as strict with the RWAs unlike their control of industrial units. After the issuance of “Consent to Operate” certificate SPCB

^[28] does not carry out the yearly inspection to monitor the functioning of the STP. However, the condominiums are being developed near the habitats and when there is disposal of untreated drainage water from these high rise buildings, there is protest and agitation from the local people and sometimes these lead to protracted court cases. RWAs need to take care of these aspects in conjunction with Statutory Bodies and Regulatory/ Authorities. ^[27]

(iii) City/Town Development Authorities:

^[29] This body looks after the solid waste disposal system of the community. Waste/ garbage collection and disposal is a city municipality responsibility and the norms, ^[30] SOP and rules of the city administration are also changing at regular intervals. RWAs have to follow the norms laid down by appropriate development authority.

(iv) Labour & Employment Department: ^[31]

Government usually changes the norms of minimum wages, Employee Provident Funds, Employee State Insurance Contribution and Bonus, which the RWAs are obliged to follow.

(v) Real Estate Regulatory Authority

(RERA): After the completion of apartments, builder/ promoter should obtain a Occupancy Certificate from the ^[32] **State Real Estate Regulatory Authority** as per the new RERA Act 2016. As builder usually fails to comply various norms and standards of RERA, there is avoidable delay in the issuance of Occupancy Certificate. However, the residents, due to lack of knowledge about

OC, usually take the possession of the flats and after they occupy the flat, the builder/ promoter usually gives less attention to obtaining OC. However, it becomes a complicated issue in case of any accident/ fire or earthquake. It is the primary duty of the RWAs to take up this issue with the builder and if necessary with the state Real Estate Regulatory Authority^[32].

(vi) **Apartment Ownership Act:**^[33]

There has been a new Apartment Ownership Act which was notified by the Government of India in 1989.^[33] However, various State governments took their own time to implement these in their states. The Act empowers RWAs to manage the society in a more efficient manner. RWA functionaries should be educated about the provisions of Apartment Ownership Act.^[5]

To adhere to and follow the norms of these statutory bodies needs budget and it can only be met through the^[9] CAM charges collected from the residents. It is a challenge for the RWAs to convince the resident to comply with the norms and compliances and for this, proper leadership is required for the RWAs.^[33] From the survey, it has been found that sometimes RWAs skip through the compliances and norms, for which the succeeding Office Bearers have been penalised for such violations. Therefore, adherence of the statutory compliances has become a critical issue of the RWAs and more study is required on the subject.

7. Summary & Conclusions

As on today, there is no cohesion/ coordination between the statutory bodies like Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA), Pollution Control Board, Fire & Safety Department and Competent authorities like City/ District Development Authority, as a result of which the members of RWAs are helpless in managing their RWAs properly. It is the responsibility of the RWAs to liaise with these bodies for reducing the complexity of taking over of the properties from the promoter to the RWAs. Secondly, there are many issues and challenges in this domain and they can be taken up as research subjects at the Ph. D. level of management study. Thirdly, agencies involved in providing manpower services to the RWAs do not adhere to the statutory compliances and therefore create problems to the societies they serve.

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