

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Improvement Regime: Public Trusts, Real Estates, and India's Urban Futurities

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## Abstract

Over the last two decades, since scholarly writing on India witnessed an “urban turn,” numerous historians have analyzed the role of the improvement trust in the redevelopment of Indian cities in the twentieth century, most specifically those of Bombay, Calcutta, and Delhi. This paper revisits and reassesses some of their key arguments to suggest that rather than studying the “failures” of the individual trusts to foster sanitary built environments, we should pay attention to the contingent workings of the city trusts that were constitutively designed for such failures. Using a comparative analysis of the Bombay and Calcutta improvement trusts, this paper offers a retelling of the history of twentieth-century Indian urbanism through the inauguration of an “improvement regime.” It posits that a structural analysis of the trust’s legal and financial framework opens innovative ways of reading “improvement” as a new, twentieth-century language, technology, and rationality of urban governance. The improvement trust devised the art of spatiotemporal management to secure the city’s built environment—rather than its residents—against future uncertainties. The paper takes us through various episodes in the career of the improvement trust—its introduction of technocratic rule, partnership with private investors, speculation in the urban land market, and finally emergence as the city’s leading rentier—in short, the “new developments” that we associate with neoliberal urbanism today. Rather than mapping these developments as neoliberal inventions, this paper invites readers to view them as the slow and (dis)continuous unraveling of a century-old improvement regime.

**Keywords:** India; improvement trust; real estate; financialization; speculation; colonialism; law; city; economy; urban governance

## Introduction

In the winter of 1926, Cecil Henry Bompas, the former chairman of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, was invited to speak at London’s Royal Society of Arts about the Trust’s operations. Bompas’ paper offered a detailed survey of the institution’s foundation and challenges that relentlessly sprang up in its day-to-day workings.

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As the evening progressed, the lecture turned into a felicitation for Bompas who had successfully led the mission of improving India's foremost metropolis. Bompas' credit lay not in the reorganization of Calcutta's built environment but rather in the more challenging task of changing the perception of the Indian public towards said improvements. "In the first place, the population was very much opposed to the improvement," Bompas informed his audience. "The Indian people liked to be left alone. When anyone came along with any scheme the people always thought to themselves, 'Why does this man want to improve us?'"<sup>1</sup>

Bompas was certainly not the first colonial officer to encounter pushback to their reformist agendas. Eric Stokes reminds us that in 1824 Governor of Madras Thomas Munro had expressed similar sentiments, writing, "I have no faith in the modern doctrine of the rapid improvement of the Hindoos, or of any other people. The character of the Hindoos is probably much the same as when Vasco da Gama first visited India, and it is not likely that it will be much better a century hence. When I read of a measure by which a large province has been suddenly improved, or a race of semi-barbarians civilized almost to quakerism, I throw away the book."<sup>2</sup> On casual reading, it may appear that Cecil Bompas was merely confirming Thomas Munro's "prescient" observation from a century before. Munro was convinced of the impossibility of stirring "semi-barbarians" out of their permanent state of stupor and onto a unilinear march toward progress and civilization.<sup>3</sup> Bompas, though not as resigned and less racist, seemed to have reached a similar conclusion: Indians had a pathological inhibition regarding improvement. But likening improvement to a "scheme" in Bompas' own recollection deserves careful scrutiny.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the British imperial government in India began instituting a series of City Improvement Trusts starting with Bombay in 1898, Calcutta in 1912, Lahore in 1936, and Delhi in 1937, which signaled two significant developments. First, the government removed itself from the nineteenth-century liberal tradition that sought moral and material upliftment of its colonial subjects through a series of regulatory and disciplinary measures.<sup>4</sup> Second, it channeled the work of improvement exclusively through the operations of a public trust in the form of general improvement schemes. This paper argues that the constitution of the early twentieth-century improvement trust, both as a legal entity and financial vehicle, inaugurated a new language, technology, and rationality of urban governance across Indian cities. It illustrates how the rhetoric of "improvement," much like Bompas' use of the term "scheme," was widely adopted by city trusts to underscore that livability in India's rapidly growing cities was intimately tied to the trust's ambition to efficiently organize time and space toward secure and profitable ends. Freed from the burden of "civilizing

<sup>1</sup>C. H. Bompas, "The Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 75, 3868 (1927): 199–219, 216.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 24.

<sup>3</sup>Munro's observation draws from a long tradition of Western imperialist thinking that upholds Europe as the beacon of culture and civilization and the non-European world as prehistoric, savage, and enchanted.

<sup>4</sup>Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Sudipta Sen, "Liberalism and the British Empire in India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, 3 (2015): 711–22.

natives,” improvement was reinvented as a legal and financial tactic that turned spatial planning into a future-building enterprise. Using a comparative methodological lens, particularly taking the instance of Bombay and Calcutta, this paper attends to the novel ways in which the trust reconfigured questions of housing and sanitation using the language of financialization and real estate development. Neither the urban space nor the twentieth century are incidental backdrops to this story. Rather, time and space play a crucial role in underlining the historically contingent nature of this improvement regime. The improvement trust took the city as the object of governance to introduce a range of legal, financial, and infrastructural innovations in its built environment to secure it against future uncertainties. As the following sections explain, the trust inaugurated a system of technocratic governance, partnered with private investors, fueled a speculative urban land market, and made windfall profits on future building constructions—in short, things we associate with neoliberal urbanism today. The broader objective of this paper is to trace the ways in which the early twentieth-century improvement regime was a silent divination of our contemporary urban predicaments.

### An Improvement Regime

In 1896, Bombay experienced a devastating bubonic plague outbreak. The pestilence then spread through the ports of Calcutta and Karachi and slowly made its way into the country's interior, killing thousands and paralyzing commercial activities in India's busiest economic centers. The plague was, however, not just an “Indian” affair. Owing to the transcontinental nature of nineteenth-century maritime trade, death and disease traveled alongside cargo, quickly turning the bubonic plague into what is commonly known as the “Third Pandemic” in human history.<sup>5</sup> Given its massive scale, the plague occasioned a flurry of International Sanitary Conventions, Plague Commissions, and an unprecedented rise in global epidemiological studies. In a more localized context, it paved the way for the establishment of India's first city improvement trust in the island city of Bombay.

The Bombay Improvement Trust (hereafter, BIT) swung into operation in 1898, modeling itself on the Glasgow Improvement Trust (GIT). Following the onslaught of recurring typhus and cholera epidemics, GIT had been established in 1866 by an Act of Parliament to “acquire and clear for redevelopment approximately 90 acres of the most crowded residential neighborhoods of the old city.”<sup>6</sup> Calcutta, which had been similarly affected by the plague, established the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) in 1912, modeled on Bombay's, though deliberations over its establishment had begun as early as 1899. This section uses these three instances to discuss the modular nature of these improvement trust formations which were all established in the wake of dire medical emergencies. I analyze the ways in which the threat of health crises translated into opportunities for the creation of urban redevelopment projects

<sup>5</sup>For a comprehensive study on the bubonic plague's impact on global urban centers, see Myron Echenberg, *Plague Ports: The Global Urban Impact of Bubonic Plague, 1894–1901* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Sandip Hazareesingh, “Colonial Modernism and the Flawed Paradigms of Urban Renewal: The Uneven Development of Bombay City, 1900–1925,” *Urban History* 28, 2 (2001): 235–55, 239.

—Sonali Dhanpal calls it “plague urbanism”<sup>7</sup>—in the hands of its respective city administrators. I argue that the alibi of “health” and “hygiene” helped reinforce social hierarchies and widen the inequality between indigenous caste and class groups, elucidating the imbrication of caste and capital in industrial capitalist settings of Bombay and Calcutta. Finally, this section underscores the merits of studying both the internal logics and the contingent workings of these trusts to understand the implications of this improvement regime on the social and economic life of its population.

The implementation of improvement measures, via urban redevelopment schemes, in the wake of epidemiological emergencies, was a recurrent affair. Health officials and sanitation experts routinely consulted on the matter reported that the poor health and hygiene of the urban population was a direct outcome of their unsanitary living conditions. In 1874, James B. Russell, the medical officer of health in Glasgow, began his report with a similar observation: “Whereas various portions of the city of Glasgow are so built, and the buildings thereon are so densely inhabited as to be highly injurious to the moral and physical welfare of the inhabitants, and many of the thoroughfares are narrow, circuitous, and inconvenient, and it would be of public and local advantage if various houses and buildings are taken down, and those portions of the said City reconstituted, and new streets were constructed in and through various parts of said City.”<sup>8</sup> Russell’s report is perhaps a testament to the versatility of Glasgow’s medical practitioners, who could speak with great expertise on the problems of urban congestion and offer detailed advice on housing reconstructions. An even likelier explanation is that it speaks to the ingenuity of GIT, which mobilized the voice of a respected health expert to attest to the necessity of housing demolitions for the “moral and physical welfare” of Glasgow’s residents. Emboldened by Russell’s professional opinion, housing and sanitation—two central concerns that emerged out of the cholera epidemic—quickly transformed into alibis that justified the Glasgow trust undertaking citywide evictions.

James Russell was by no means an exceptional character; in name, profession, and civic interest, he closely resembled his predecessor, James Randal Martin, a surgeon at the Native Hospital in Calcutta. In 1837, Martin published “Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta,” which drew attention to the city’s unsanitary conditions and charting out possible remedies to ameliorate them. With his impressive knowledge of tropical topography, Martin was an indispensable figure in the work of mapping and surveying colonial territories. Calcutta’s precarious position, both as the imperial seat of power and a miasma-ridden swamp, made it the subject of many clinical observations. The first colonial administrator to seriously undertake the work of “curing” Calcutta’s pathologies was Governor General Richard Wellesley. In 1803, Wellesley set up a Town Improvement Committee to look into “the health, the comfort, and the convenience of the numerous inhabitants of this great town.”<sup>9</sup> Although his “numerous inhabitants”

<sup>7</sup>Sonali Dhanpal, “The Making of a Model Town: Planning in a Princely City and the All-India Sanitary Conferences,” *Planning Perspectives* 38, 3 (2023): 467–97.

<sup>8</sup>James B. Russell, *On the Immediate Results of the Operations of the Glasgow Improvement Trust* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain Printers, 1875), 1.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Beattie, “Colonial Space: Health and Modernity in Barabazaar, Kolkata,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 14, 2 (2003): 7–19, 10.

was shorthand for Calcutta's European population and "improvement" implied tightening control over the "native" part of town, it positioned him at the beginning of a long line of administrators, medical practitioners, planners, and engineers who would all go on to assign a direct correlation between the city's health and that of its inhabitants. By the end of the nineteenth century, the expert opinion of the health executive had become indispensable to municipal reports even as the definition of "healthy city" differed sharply from its earlier connotations.

The trust diagnosed the root of urban emergencies, medical and otherwise, as the congested, unplanned, and insalubrious conditions of native settlements. Different structures and styles of autoconstructed tenements—referred variously as slums, *chawls*, and *bustees*<sup>10</sup>—housed the city's industrial and domestic workforce. The laboring population, typically homogenized as "poor and working class" across all official records, was a figure both of extreme necessity and utter notoriety in the eyes of both public administrators and private ratepayers. For city administrators, the "urban poor"—otherwise representing a heterogeneous population belonging to marginalized lower-caste and untouchable Dalit communities—were harbingers of disease, malnourishment, and crime. In his report, E. P. Richards, CIT's chief engineer, enumerated an intriguing list of "evils" caused by slum settlements including crime, insanity, disease, sedition, anarchism, and unhappiness. "In a word," he concluded, "they, of all causes, produce by far the highest percentage of all bad, weakly, and useless citizens."<sup>11</sup> To the city's ratepayers, who typically belonged to landed upper-caste communities, their presence signaled the uncomfortable contiguity of socially polluting elements, who aside from harboring diseased bodies and criminal proclivities also posed a threat to the ratepayers' upper-caste purity.

Recent urban history scholarship has explored the ways in which the colonial discourse of health, hygiene, and Western modernity conveniently dovetailed with upper-caste "traditional" Hindu sensibilities<sup>12</sup> around purity and pollution. Nabaparna Ghosh shows how Calcutta's upper-caste genteel society, known as *bhadraloks*, adopted a method Ghosh calls "civicization," in which the colonial rhetoric of health and sanitation, "were entwined in religion and caste practices."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, historians of colonial Bombay have shown the imbrications of caste in the making of Bombay into a late colonial capitalist hub.<sup>14</sup> Departing from conventional portrayals of the Indian city as a casteless milieu, these scholars highlight how the late colonial city as the site of industrial capitalism recoded

<sup>10</sup>"Slum" is a generic term for autoconstructed informal settlements. *Chawls* are specific to Bombay and refer to tenement-style houses typically housing a significant number of the city's millworkers. *Bustees* has a pan-Indian usage and is deployed interchangeably with slums.

<sup>11</sup>E. P. Richards, *The Condition, Improvement, and the Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas* (London: Routledge, 2015), 363.

<sup>12</sup>Here, I am drawing from Lata Mani's incisive analysis on how "Hindu tradition" came to be defined in official colonial discourse in the context of the Sati Abolition debate; "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): 119–56.

<sup>13</sup>Nabaparna Ghosh, *A Hygienic City-Nation: Space, Community, and Everyday Life in Colonial Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 4, 16.

<sup>14</sup>Juned Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay: City Making and Politics of the Poor* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021); Nikhil Rao, *House, but No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs, 1989–1964* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Sheetal Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum: The Power of Capital in Colonial Bombay* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

sociological caste hierarchies into employer-worker market dynamics. Most notably, Juned Shaikh underscores that it is important to go “beyond the myth of the city as a cosmopolitan domain of industrial modernity and highlight the historical experiences of religion, classes, castes, and languages in the city.”<sup>15</sup> This banding of caste with capital complicated the racial binary of British administrators and indigenous elites and produced multiple factions, informed by competing and self-aggrandizing interests and motivations. Self-seeking rivalries notwithstanding, the official administration, the landholding class, and the business community did unequivocally agree on one thing: slum demolition and dispossession of the “urban poor” was the only way to restore the health of *their* cities. Elsewhere, the 1900s marked a watershed moment of “municipal socialism,” as workers across cities in Europe and North America rose in protest against bourgeois class power, demanding better and affordable living and working conditions and a rigorous democratization of urban administration.<sup>16</sup> In India, however, the complex entanglement of caste and class fortified by colonialist capitalism defused any possibility of socialist resistance from below. Not until the 1930s would these cities become sites of working-class politics.<sup>17</sup>

### Legal Technologies of the *Uncharitable Public Trust*

Extant writings on both Bombay and Calcutta note the trusts’ dissatisfaction with existing municipal bylaws, which failed to execute slum clearance drives satisfactorily. Prashant Kidambi notes the disenchantment of BIT’s chairman, J. P. Orr, who likened the situation to “the labors of Sisyphus ... beginning with slums and ending with more slums.”<sup>18</sup> This failure was not owing to the negligence of municipal authorities, or at least not entirely. The late nineteenth-century municipal corporation was a representative institution with limited powers of civic administration like conservancy, sanitation, and taxation.<sup>19</sup> Recollecting the challenges of the Calcutta municipality, former Deputy Chairman S. W. Goode rued, “It soon became evident that a large deliberative body could not advantageously deal with details of business, which it was required to superintend.”<sup>20</sup> That managing municipal Bombay was an equally tall order is evident in the writings of D. E. Wacha, Bombay corporation’s ex-president: “Bombay was too busy amassing handsome fortunes to be able to devote even an hour’s leisure every three months to manage its domestic affairs.”<sup>21</sup>

Ambitious projects like slum eradication required an executive body with legal powers to successfully acquire, demolish, and redevelop properties. The

<sup>15</sup>Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*, 9.

<sup>16</sup>Shelton Stromquist, *Claiming the City: A Global History of Workers’ Fight for Municipal Socialism* (London: Verso Books, 2023).

<sup>17</sup>Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*, 4; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890 to 1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>18</sup>Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2007), 93.

<sup>19</sup>For a detailed discussion on the mandates of the Calcutta and Bombay municipal corporations, see S. W. Goode, *Municipal Calcutta: Its Institutions in Their Origin and Growth* (Edinburgh: T & A. Constable, 1916); D. E. Wacha, *Rise and Growth of Bombay Municipal Government* (Madras: G. A. Natesan & Co., 1913).

<sup>20</sup>Goode, *Municipal Calcutta*, 34.

<sup>21</sup>Wacha, *Rise and Growth*, 20.



establishment of the improvement trust should therefore be viewed as a measure adopted by the imperial government to address the limitations of the municipality to intervene in the legal geography of urban property.

While existing works recognize the circumstantial necessity behind the trust's foundation, its constitution as a legally incorporated entity still begs our attention.<sup>22</sup> This section discusses the legal instrumentality of the public trust to answer why it unleashed a regime of "uneven development" that ultimately "exacerbated the problems of congestion, bad housing, and environmental blight."<sup>23</sup> It posits that improvement as a "one-time intervention" was baked into the constitutive principle of this legal device, which made such endeavors selective and therefore "uneven." I illustrate how reading the workings of the improvement trust alongside scholarship on charitable trusts opens new ways of thinking about the public nature of the improvement trust, which was never envisioned to operate as a charitable organization. A comparison between the "general public utility" of charitable trusts and the "general improvement schemes" of the improvement trusts allows us to view how the different modalities of "giving" produced very divergent classes of "public" beneficiaries. As this and the next section explicate, once the panic generated by the plague subsided, "health" and "improvement" became pretexts to explore the range of investment opportunities made available by the city's built environment. Further, they exemplify how the trust's constitution offered legal scaffolding that allowed it to pursue lucrative financial opportunities under the garb of performing public good. Although the improvement trust was established to reorganize the spatial clutter in India's two important industrial cities, it also acted as what Leilah Vevaina calls "a time-keeping device."<sup>24</sup> Put simply, the trust's everyday operations were founded upon a promise made in the past (at the time of its incorporation), of benefits that would accrue in the future. Indeed, it is in the twentieth century that the art of spatial organization—"improvement"—turned into a future investment.

The legal history of the trust is enmeshed in the history of the corporation. The latter, having first emerged in Roman law, has been instructive in understanding law's role in the organization of collective life. Legal historian F. W. Maitland's observation helps to clarify the nature of the legal institution that was the improvement trust: "Persons are either natural or artificial. The only natural persons are men. The only artificial persons are corporations."<sup>25</sup> Corporations differ from other associational lives of "natural men" in how they are formally organized as artificial legal personalities through a charter or a statute. As Western political thought teaches us, everything from the state, crown, commonwealth, university, municipal boroughs, to joint stock companies are legally incorporated artificial entities. The

<sup>22</sup>Although Nabaparna Ghosh acknowledges the gap in existing literature regarding the trust's legal powers, her work attends to the "legal trials that the Trust carried out outside of the courts in informal spaces such as the street-side, city-schools, a room in the house of an influential gentleman, and so on, forcibly acquiring land for urban development." A survey of the trust's artificial legal personhood is still amiss from her work: *A Hygienic City Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 12. For a discussion on CIT's legal trials, see pp. 85–95.

<sup>23</sup>Hazareesingh, "Colonial Modernisms," 235.

<sup>24</sup>Leilah Vevaina, *Trust Matters: Parsi Endowments in Mumbai and the Horoscope of a City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 26.

<sup>25</sup>F. W. Maitland, "The Corporation Sole," In David Runciman and Magnus Ryan, eds. *State, Trust, and Corporation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

incorporation happens under specific terms of a contract between concerned parties that empower the newly formed corporation to borrow money, have a common seal, and possess and dispose of property, and even property in perpetuity. Given the range of incorporated entities that organize collective life, how are trusts different from corporations? More specifically, how was the improvement trust distinct from the municipal corporation?

While the finer distinctions between the trust and the corporation are harder to spell out since both are created using the same legal tools, the trust fundamentally operates as a fiduciary organization that consecrates “a tripartite contract between a donor, a beneficiary (of the donor’s gift), and a trustee (who acts on behalf of the beneficiary and administers the gift).”<sup>26</sup> The improvement trust was founded on a similar principle that enabled the imperial government to establish the trust and institute a board of trustees who would perform the impartial and impersonal obligation of executing the trust’s objectives toward the beneficence of the city and its public. The concept of gift in this case was merely metaphorical and did not actually imply charity, perhaps alluding to the *gift* of civic improvement. In more concrete terms, the acts of parliament that instituted the Bombay and Calcutta improvement trusts were respectively called the Bombay Improvement Act of 1898 and the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911. In both cases, the objective of improvement was envisioned to accommodate the requirements of a rapidly expanding city. The Calcutta Improvement Act was “an act to provide for the improvement *and* expansion of Calcutta.”<sup>27</sup> It provisioned CIT to “demolish or construct buildings, acquire land, and rehouse persons of the poorer or working classes displaced by the execution of improvement schemes.”<sup>28</sup> The objectives of BIT spelt out in the Bombay Improvement Act were similarly worded: “making new streets, opening out crowded localities, reclaiming lands from the sea to provide room for the expansion of the city and constructing sanitary dwellings for the poor and for the police.”<sup>29</sup>

The conventional understanding of the trust as a statutory corporation leads us to believe that the artificial legal personality of a corporate body, such as the trust, outlives its natural members.<sup>30</sup> In ordinary parlance, it assumes that the trust, by virtue of being more than the sum of its members, would live forever; that is, in perpetuity. Maitland, however, reminds us of the contractual nature of trusts that are the product of a specific time and place and hence “cannot be established by law in perpetuity.”<sup>31</sup> Such limits were articulated under a “rule against perpetuities” unless the trust in question is instituted for the administration of charitable purposes, in which case “it was settled that where there is ‘charity,’ there can be no trouble about ‘perpetuity.’”<sup>32</sup> Speaking of Parsi trusts, Vevaina tells us that assets held by the trust

<sup>26</sup>Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 68.

<sup>27</sup>The Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911 under the Bengal Act no. V of 1911, my emphasis.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>*The Bombay City Improvement Trust from 1898 to 1909: A Lecture Delivered by J. P. Orr before the Bombay Association of Architects and Surveyors* (Bombay: Times Press, 1911), 1.

<sup>30</sup>Bhavani Raman, “Corporations,” in Mariana Valverde, et al., eds., *Routledge Handbook of Law and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 108.

<sup>31</sup>Maitland, “Corporation Sole,” xxiv.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 99–100.



are allowed to live forever “because they are obligated to do good.”<sup>33</sup> Given the proliferation of public and private charitable trusts in India since the nineteenth century, their distinction from non-charitable trusts and cartels warrants thorough exploration.

Although the improvement trust was expected to do public good, neither BIT nor CIT were planned to live forever. At the time of CIT’s establishment, Secretary of State George Hamilton had maintained that the trust should wind up business in twenty years and shift all liabilities to the municipality. Partho Datta notes that such a step was designed as a “one-time intervention” to address the most pressing concerns plaguing the metropolis.<sup>34</sup> Almost a century after Thomas Munro wrote off Indians as incapable of “rapid improvement,” that is precisely what the improvement trust set out to accomplish over a short tenure. Here, I read Datta’s use of “one-time intervention” alongside Munro’s deployment of “rapidity” to understand what improvement had come to mean at the turn of the twentieth century. Once it had been established as an urgent measure to tide over a medical emergency, the trust was expected to bring “immediate relief” to the city’s most congested and unsanitary neighborhoods through the “ready” demolition of unhygienic dwellings and the “simultaneous” rehousing of dispossessed populations.<sup>35</sup>

The air of promptitude palpable in the trust’s plan of action was animated by two central objectives. First, as an executive body, the trust was directed to take over responsibilities from the municipality. The latter’s deliberative role coupled with its constitutive inability to take legal actions in the domain of urban land management had earned it a reputation as slow and ineffective. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Calcutta municipality was being publicly denounced as a “talking shop of baboos,”<sup>36</sup> which directly pinned the blame on the lackadaisical nature of native representatives—mostly belonging to landed aristocracies—who filled its public offices. As its first call of action, the trust thus sought to relieve the city from the stranglehold of decades-long municipal inertia and make it livable again. Second, the trust was expected to restore the “sanitary credit” of the city as a means to revive business in a plague-stricken metropolis.<sup>37</sup> We have seen how these cities sitting at the cusp of industrial modernity employed caste and capital to produce economically thriving but socially unequal urban geographies. As the city’s primary administrator the trust was tasked to bring about sanitary reforms that would maximize its economic growth. It must be remembered that by decongesting neighborhoods and developing hygienic dwellings the trust was simply planning to restore the industriousness of its working population—pressing concerns regarding the

<sup>33</sup>Vevaina, *Trust Matters*, 3.

<sup>34</sup>Partho Datta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta, c. 1800–1940* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012), 204.

<sup>35</sup>These terms do not come with specific citations since they are conspicuously present across all reports of the improvement trusts.

<sup>36</sup>Swati Chattopadhyay writes, “Calcutta’s negative impression had much to do with the Bengalis, who were considered disagreeable and politically dangerous, while the Parsis in Bombay were seen as allies of British interest.” In *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>37</sup>Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum*, 151.

workers' social welfare were blithely left out of its legal framing.<sup>38</sup> With the trust's appointment, commerce, industry, and epidemiology were consolidated under the banner of urban health and improvement.

Under provisions of the improvement acts of 1898 and 1911, Bombay and Calcutta appointed thirteen and eleven trustees, respectively. In both cities, only four members were appointed from the municipal corporation, including the corporation's chairman. In Calcutta, the remaining seats were occupied by one member elected from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, one elected from the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, a chairman of the trust, and four other persons. The chairman and those four were to be appointed by the local government by notification.<sup>39</sup> In Bombay, the Government of India appointed three trustees and the chairman of the trust. Additionally, BIT had three ex officios—the municipal commissioner, the general officer commanding the Bombay District, and the collector. Finally, a total of six members were elected, including three members from the municipal corporation and one each from the Chamber of Commerce, Bombay Port Trust, and the Bombay Millowners' Association.<sup>40</sup> The constitution of the board of trustees in both cities was a sharp indication of the municipality's waning influence in the new scheme of urban management. As its authority dwindled, so did the voice of the landed gentry who were the bulk of the municipality's native representation. Lest the municipality's "talking shop" culture be reactivated, the trust took to amplifying other voices in the city, most significantly those of the city's commercial elites. Accordingly, the improvement trust fashioned itself as a loyal defender of private enterprise, given that its success in urban redevelopment relied on the generosity of private entrepreneurs.

The Bengal Chamber of Commerce had been an interested stakeholder in Calcutta's improvement long before CIT's foundation. In its correspondence with the Government of Bengal in 1910, the chamber presented a strong case for its representation in the prospective improvement trust: "Seeing that the commercial community are to contribute so largely to the revenues of the trust, it is only reasonable that they should be strongly represented."<sup>41</sup> It seems likely that the chamber's representation in BIT had encouraged the Bengal Chamber to put forth a similar appeal for its own representation.

While the board of trustees represented the public face of the improvement trust, its operations were delegated to a team of experts who possessed the scientific knowledge of engineering, architecture, and land valuation. The initial proceedings of the trust carried advertisements calling for candidates with "sound theoretical and practical training"<sup>42</sup> to fill a range of positions for engineers, architects, planners, developers, land surveyors, and land valuers. The rapid technocratization of the trust was yet another nail in the municipality's coffin. Municipal officials already viewed the establishment of the trust as "a condemnation of their prior work."<sup>43</sup> With the

<sup>38</sup>For a discussion on the politics surrounding Bombay's social welfare initiatives, see Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*.

<sup>39</sup>The Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911.

<sup>40</sup>Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 1.

<sup>41</sup>"The Calcutta Improvement Scheme," letter from Chamber to Government of Bengal (Legislative Department), Calcutta, 16 Dec. 1910, 449.

<sup>42</sup>Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1912–13.

<sup>43</sup>Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum*, 152.

enlistment of technocrats, the culture of civic administration underwent a radical transformation. The city's commercial class, long frustrated with the municipality, had been itching to welcome a system that would enable speedy transaction of business. In another letter to the Calcutta Corporation in 1910, the Bengal chamber wrote, "The object of the proposed scheme is to ensure that buildings are constructed on sound principles of engineering science as well as follow some broad rules of architecture so that they may be safe and artistic."<sup>44</sup>

Aside from stoking the ill-will of municipal colleagues, the inauguration of a "rule of experts"<sup>45</sup> via the improvement trust had other, deep-seated implications. By matter of practice, the colonial municipality extended its voting privileges exclusively to propertied members of society who paid house and land taxes. The municipal electorate thus comprised only a small, entitled faction of the urban demography whose fiscal payments rendered them eligible for political representation. The shift from the municipality's deliberative style to the trust's quick method of execution was facilitated by the fundamental principle of the trust as a limited liability organization. By drastically reducing its membership to a handful of nominated trustees, the improvement trust emerged as an executive body with absolute powers and no real accountability toward the electorate, much less to the general public.

Here, I turn to Ritu Birla's observation that legal genealogy marks a "shift in the late colonial period from a broad notion of community to the more specific and abstract concept of the 'public.'"<sup>46</sup> For Birla, this shift embodied the chasm between "private trusts" which cater to the benefit of disadvantaged members of the community, and "public charitable trusts which offer a gift benefiting the public."<sup>47</sup> The latter "was defined in statute as a gift for public benefit, for 'general public utility.'"<sup>48</sup> The improvement trust offered no such gift; its public incorporation notwithstanding, it removed itself from the duty of delivering any form of general public utility. Instead, it channeled its energy toward the execution of "general improvement schemes" like developing "slummy and disorderly property"<sup>49</sup> and widening streets. The omission of "public utility" from the trust's mandate was hardly a careless oversight. BIT and CIT records routinely suggest they prioritized building infrastructure over doing public good. For instance, if the abolition of slums signals better living conditions for the working class, the trust's indifference to rehabilitating the dispossessed means no easy equation can be drawn between built infrastructure and public beneficence. Trust officials certainly knew about the success of public utility *elsewhere*. E. P. Richards defended the purpose of public utilities in Italy, which facilitated "friendly agreements" between city corporations and the public, noting "the superior civic culture and civic amenability of the Italian people, who recognise that town-planning is a necessary part of existence...."<sup>50</sup> Unlike civic-minded

<sup>44</sup>Letter from Chamber to the Calcutta Corporation, 25 Nov. 1910.

<sup>45</sup>I have borrowed this term from Timothy Mitchell, who discusses (among other things) the advent of technical professionals and the birth of technoscientific rationale in the workings of the Egyptian government in the twentieth century; *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>46</sup>Birla, *Stages of Capital*, 69.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 68, my emphasis.

<sup>49</sup>Richards, *Condition*, 411.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 320.

Italians, the Indian public were viewed as “laymen” who lacked health, industriousness, and “modern” civic consciousness.

Speaking on the challenges of road constructions, CIT’s land valuer complained, “It is a subject on which *almost every laymen firmly believes himself an expert*, notwithstanding the fact that the perfect road construction as technically understood to-day, continues to baffle the united efforts of the Engineering and kindred professions.”<sup>51</sup> His sardonic statement betrayed the technocrats’ overall frustration with the “very many erroneous ideas and views which the average layman has upon this subject.”<sup>52</sup> Arguably, this exasperation was heightened by the knowledge that the general public were “irresponsible critics”<sup>53</sup> who contributed very little to the trust’s coffers. This was in sharp contrast to GIT, which drew the majority of its funding from local taxation. Glasgow’s architects were confident of the “electoral support for increased expenditure on civic improvement ... especially, if this gave benefits valued by the middle class ratepayers.”<sup>54</sup> Cut off from the triad of taxation, representation, and political obligation, the colonial trust thus found itself at a strange crossroad where the municipality derided its professionalism, the imperial government constantly thwarted its long-term planning vision, and lay beneficiaries exhibited a patronizing attitude toward it.

The improvement trust, as we know, did not operate as a charitable organization, but by abandoning general public utilities and focusing on general improvement schemes, it turned into an uncharitable organization that offered very limited and selective improvements to the urban public. In 1914, Richards concluded that “general improvement schemes are too costly a remedy for insanitary conditions to warrant wholesale adoption.”<sup>55</sup> Recused from political accountability and disinterested in the public good, the trust brazenly focused on improvement schemes that only benefitted itself. As the following section details, the trust’s funding was secured through profit-making innovations from the beginning. In the midst of maintaining technocratic rigor, boosting the city’s commercial reputation, and ensuring financial profitability, even the vow of “general improvement” slowly but surely receded into the background.

### Trust as a Financial Vehicle

C. H. Bompas, who we met at the beginning of this paper regaling his audience with stories about CIT’s operations, served as its chairman for the first ten years of its existence. He was no “technical expert”; having risen through the ranks as Bengal’s magistrate and collector and later a member of the Bengal Legislative Council, he retired from the chairmanship in 1922. Bompas’ biography explains why he had so many run-ins with the trust’s chief engineer, E. P. Richards, and why Richards, self-admittedly, suffered a breakdown and had to beat a hasty retreat from Calcutta.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1913–14, my emphasis.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 10.

<sup>54</sup>Tom Hart, “Urban Growth and Municipal Government,” in Anthony Slaven and Derek H. Aldcroft, eds., *Business, Banking, and Urban Housing: Essays in Honour of S. G. Checkland* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1982), 199, 201.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 256.

<sup>56</sup>Richards, *Condition*, 13.

The preface to the Richards Report conjectures, “Perhaps Bompas resented being dragged out [by Richards] on so many morning walks as the mist was burned off by an unforgiving sun.”<sup>57</sup> The mugginess of the swampy tropics had plagued many colonial officials in their day, but what Bompas really resented was perhaps the clash of two divergent managerial sensibilities. Bompas belonged to the old school of colonial administration. Cambridge educated and a member of the prestigious Indian Civil Service, he had over twenty years of “Indian experience” and was posthumously described by *The Times* as having “inherited special legal qualities and a taste for administration in local self-government.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast, Edwin Percy Richards represented men who attained professional stature through technical vocation while their pedigrees struggled to match up to those of Bompas’ administrative caliber and/or familial distinction. In 1912, Richards was elected as a member at the Institute of Civil Engineers, an accomplishment that finally raised him to the position of CIT’s chief engineer later that year.<sup>59</sup>

In a practical sense, the technocratization of the trust implied that men like Richards now filled its institutional ranks and essentially called the shots. Richards’ report categorically stated the flaws in CIT’s constitution, which severely challenged the work of urban improvement. According to him, CIT “was not created under a Town Planning Act, but only under a local Housing Act; in fact the Calcutta Act of 1911 is based almost word for word solely on Part I alone of the English Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890—and this English Housing Act has itself been several times much amended since 1890. It may be said here at once, that *Calcutta and her suburbs cannot possibly be town planned, or controlled, or be moderately improved under the existing Improvement Act.*”<sup>60</sup> It is reasonable to surmise that Bompas, who had helped draft the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911, was not exactly chuffed by this brazen display of insubordination from his chief engineer. Yet Richards’ exasperation was not unfounded—with its current funds, CIT could only improve one-twentieth of the proposed plan, “but imperfectly, and at ruinous cost.”<sup>61</sup>

Bompas would later confess CIT’s financial difficulties to his friends at London’s Royal Society of Art. While Bombay had large swathes of government-owned land which were made over to BIT for development, “Calcutta was not so fortunate,” Bompas recalled. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 had introduced private proprietorship in Bengal, which meant the government in Calcutta had hardly any land at its disposal. “Money had to be found,” Bompas continued, “and Calcutta, while consenting to be improved, desired that anyone but itself should pay the piper.”<sup>62</sup> Besides getting governmental assistance in acquiring land at zero cost, BIT was also fortunate to have W. C. Hughes as its first chairman. Hughes was an engineer by training, who had previously served in the Public Works Department. Despite being BIT’s chairman for only two years before moving to the Bombay Port Trust, he stayed on BIT’s board until 1910. Having an engineer at its helm made BIT more amenable to a technocratic regime. In 1909, when J. P. Orr, the collector of

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., xvii.

<sup>58</sup>Robert Home, “British Colonial Civic Improvement in the Early Twentieth Century: E. P. Richards in Madras, Calcutta, and Singapore,” *Planning Perspectives* 31, 4 (2016): 635–44.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Richards, *Condition*, xv, his emphasis.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Bompas, “Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust,” 200.

Thana, was appointed as BIT's new chairman, the trust did not return to the old bureaucratic regimen even though Orr's past as a civil servant was very similar to that of CIT's Bompas. In fact, Orr was a huge supporter of this technocratic style of governance and spoke vociferously about "what an important part architects, surveyors, and builders can play in making Our city, the gate of India, fully worthy of the name 'Bombay the beautiful.'" <sup>63</sup>

Despite Orr's optimism, there remained significant challenges to securing the trust's finances in both cities. What the trusts had in legal power (to acquire, demolish, and redevelop insanitary lands) they lacked in financial clout. As Bompas said, money had to be found. This section examines the trust's function as a financial vehicle to analyze how it turned land redevelopment into a profitable venture. Here, I return to Vevaina's depiction of the trust as a time-keeping device to map out the range of future imaginations activated by the work of urban redevelopment. Three kinds of futures emerge from this discussion: one, the trust as an instrument of promissory futurities; two, planning as a future-oriented discourse; and three, finance as a technology of profiting in the present, banking on future uncertainties.

While trust, planning, and finance have histories dating back to older times, their rich interactions, facilitated by the workings of the improvement trust, could not have predated the onset of this new century. This was not merely coincidental with the trust's establishment, but points to the larger developments that were taking place in the production of "the economy" as a new object and rationale of governing populations toward health, wealth, and prosperity. Michel Foucault, who theorized this as "governmentality"—the ramifications of modern power via new technologies and rationalities of government control—anchored his observations in nineteenth-century European state. <sup>64</sup> Postcolonial scholars have long debated the relevance of Western theories like governmentality—hegemonic in their "universalist" claims—in colonial settings. <sup>65</sup> Among urban historians, Stephen Legg and Sheetal Chhabria have rigorously engaged with Foucault's governmentality in the context of colonial Indian cities. <sup>66</sup> In *Making the Modern Slum*, Chhabria illuminates how "the city" and "the economy" were historically produced in specific ways through their mutual interactions. Following her, I highlight how Bombay and Calcutta in their own ways became generative grounds for the staging of multiform economic governmentalities that undertook the work of spatial reorganization toward the management of the city's health, wealth, and wellness. Once the fear of plague began receding from collective memory, the improvement trust delegated itself to plan the future in a manner that would not only secure the city from impending emergencies but

<sup>63</sup>Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 28.

<sup>64</sup>Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 87–104.

<sup>65</sup>David Scott, "Colonial Governmentality," *Social Text* 43 (1995): 191–220; Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections in Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>66</sup>Stephen Legg has deployed the Foucauldian lens throughout his works to critically study the making of colonial Delhi. See especially his "Governmentality, Congestion, and Calculation in Colonial Delhi," *Social and Cultural Geography* 7, 5 (2006): 709–29; Also see Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum*; and "The Aboriginal Alibi: Governing Dispossession in Colonial Bombay," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, 4 (2018): 1096–126.



transform it into a thriving space for capital generation. In other words, at the start of the twentieth century, the future pervaded the improvement regime through the technologies of financialized urban planning.

The Government of India decided that local improvements should not be financed from imperial revenues, much to the chagrin of the cities' commercial classes, who demanded stronger financial backing from the government. In its correspondence with the Government of Bengal, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce argued that it was incumbent upon the imperial government to guarantee the loans "irrespective of any calamities or disasters" in order to attract the investing public.<sup>67</sup> In the end, initial funding for both of the trusts was secured through contributions from the local government and the municipality. Additionally, the trust was expected to develop lands and sell them at profit to recover expenses. This strategy, known as "recoupment," proved to be a gamechanger. Although recovery of development costs was the primary objective of the recoupment scheme, it did not take long for the trust to mobilize its monopoly role as the city's official land developer to accumulate windfall profits from this exercise. Evidently, the improvement trust mastered the tactic of "house flipping" in the early decades of the twentieth century.

This mastery was gained by consolidating the expertise of the trust's team of technocrats. First, a robust plan had to be put in place to decongest neighborhoods, clear slums, build roads, and improve housing. This was the responsibility of the chief engineer. The first annual proceeding issued by CIT stated, "The principal duties of the Chief Engineer will be to frame and execute Improvement schemes, whereby new thoroughfares will be driven through the congested quarters of Calcutta and new suburbs laid out to accommodate the increasing population."<sup>68</sup> If there was a professional whose responsibilities exceeded that of the chief engineer, it was the land valuer. At a structural level, the improvement regime was premised on a meticulously calculated system that translated the abstract nature of value into material and monetizable forms. Indeed, it was the trust which recognized that "livability," an otherwise qualitative and affective register, could be achieved in industrial cities like Bombay and Calcutta by developing a built environment that induced productivity and generated wealth. This was predicated upon the reductive assumption that "the city" was a self-contained, autonomous domain that functioned with the sole intent of boosting capitalist accumulation. In this, the trust exhibited what Timothy Mitchell calls the "character of calculability"<sup>69</sup> that quantified the complex world of the city into mathematical figures and numbers. The work of assigning value to the city, its neighborhoods, houses, and even its urban populace was motivated by a capitalist rationale which quantified use values (determined by personal utilities and hence relative in nature) into exchange values dictated by market forces. This practice of assigning a standard market value to all persons and things could only succeed by delegitimizing other embedded rituals of valuation that fortified social relations in the city. However, as Shabnum Tejani has pointed out, privileging market value over other value systems was an arbitrary exercise given that "there was no objective

<sup>67</sup>Letter from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce to the Government of Bengal, 16 Dec. 1910.

<sup>68</sup>Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1912–13.

<sup>69</sup>See Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 80–119.

value in land that officers of the trust could establish.”<sup>70</sup> Despite the vagueness surrounding the definition of market value, it was extolled as an impersonal and hence objective method of assessment. This “market rationality” also impelled trust officials to recover “valuable lands” from families who preferred to stay on their ancestral property, “rather than allow the land to be used for more advantageous and profitable purposes.”<sup>71</sup> The land valuer thus became an emblematic figure in this regime of calculability who assigned new values to not just existing structures but even ones that were yet to come.

The work of land valuation was a long-drawn-out process that required a careful assessment of the costs of acquiring and demolishing houses, procuring building materials, and even estimating the value of future constructions. Given its budgetary constraints, the trust minimized the compensations paid out to owners by selecting lands that had fallen into disuse. Because they violated sanitary codes, *bustee* lands were always the cheapest acquisitions. Thus, hygiene and profitability were joined to dispossess the city’s marginalized laboring population with little consideration for dignified rehabilitation. Two instances make the uncharitable workings of the capitalist improvement trust amply clear. In the first, BIT’s Orr disparages the “large lock-up of capital” that a particular improvement scheme entailed, only to add, “but the result will be the abolition of an area of peculiarly bad slum property traversed by putrid open drains, and comprising what is a filthy lake during the monsoon season and a foul swamp in the cold season.”<sup>72</sup> In the second instance, CIT’s Bompas calculates the potential challenges that a slum eradication may pose, and notes, “Only one in five of the population was a female, which showed that the majority of the residents were temporary immigrants to Calcutta, the displacement of whom would cause no great hardship.”<sup>73</sup> While Orr’s description of the “peculiarly bad slum property” ignored what its eradication might mean for the evictees, for Bompas such displacements evinced no sense of “great hardship” for the trust. In both cases, the trusts’ chairmen demonstrated a complete lack of empathy for the residents living alongside “putrid open drains” and instead focused solely on redevelopment costs.

This represented one side of the recoupment scheme; its other side was founded on the art of predicting the future value of such redeveloped establishments. CIT’s annual proceedings for 1913–14 clearly stated, “The utility and therefore the value of a building is almost always affected by an Improvement scheme but to attempt to estimate the value of such changes would be an extremely speculative option.”<sup>74</sup> Seeing that the trust was designed to sell redeveloped surplus lands to private investors at a profit, it may be argued that the trust’s role in fueling land speculation was premeditated. The whole process reflected the coordinated industry of a team of surveyors, valuers, engineers, and accountants. More significantly, it showed how, through its commitment to manufacturing long-term spatial futures, the improvement trust differed from previous planning regimes, which merely constructed durable infrastructures.

<sup>70</sup>Shabnum Tejani, “Disputing ‘Market Value’: The Bombay Improvement Trust and the Reshaping of a Speculative Land Market in Early Twentieth-Century Bombay,” *Urban History* 48, 3 (2021): 572–89, 574.

<sup>71</sup>Bompas, “Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust,” 219.

<sup>72</sup>Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 22.

<sup>73</sup>Bompas, “Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust,” 205.

<sup>74</sup>Proceedings of Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1913–14.

## Fictions of Real Estate

The improvement trust's sole focus on housing redevelopment could be chalked up to a number of explanations. That the improvement act was modeled on the English Housing Act was perhaps the most important factor, at least in Calcutta. The colonial trust claimed that the commercial potentials of Bombay and Calcutta could be unlocked by disciplining the cities' working-class populations. Richards' observation that slum settlements were responsible for producing "bad, weakly, and useless citizens" meant that a direct correlation was being drawn between housing reform and the moral and material reformation of the working class. It is unclear whether Bombay's millowners were similarly concerned with the "moral" reformation of their labor force, but records suggest that they had been struggling to house their workers since before the plague. The question of millworkers' housing lay at the crucial interstices of the mill's ability to retain labor while maximizing output. Although housing the workers close to the mills guaranteed longer work hours and reduced transport allowances, the millowners' perpetual fear of labor mobilizations leading to unrest and strikes helped them decide that workers' housing should be in scattered locations far removed from the mill premises.<sup>75</sup> This issue also revealed the diverse portfolios of Bombay's millowners who also had substantial landholdings and investments in other businesses. Despite their personal stakes in the city's and commercial success, the enterprising elites calculated that it would be far more profitable if they could transfer the responsibility for housing their workers to the improvement trust. Caroline Arnold has pointed out that working-class housing became the bone of contention between BIT and the Millowners' Association as both parties "sought to place the responsibility for housing millworkers in the hands of the other from the very beginning of negotiations."<sup>76</sup> Since neither BIT nor the commercial elites were keen on shouldering a financial burden that did not guarantee considerable returns, Bombay's overcrowding problem was only exacerbated.

While extant works on India's improvement trusts have all discussed the housing crisis, Sheetal Chhabria's careful parsing of "housing" as an object of governance requires our analytical attention. For "it was through the deployment of housing," she notes, "that labor was disciplined, capital was accumulated, populations were distinguished and managed, and the city was demarcated as a distinct entity in the first place."<sup>77</sup> Chhabria's argument unpacks the government's role in *manufacturing* a new category called "housing" in the 1900s to launch itself into the optimal management of the urban population. She further adds, "shelter cataloged as 'housing' was that through which the city was imagined, materialized, and governed."<sup>78</sup> Chhabria's argument is critical on two counts: first, the translation of an abstraction (shelter) into a material necessity (housing) facilitated the standardization of a range of shelter practices into legal and formalized "housing." This not only sought to discipline the habits and behaviors of its residents but also stipulated what a healthy built environment should look like. Second, positing

<sup>75</sup>Caroline E. Arnold, "The Bombay Improvement Trust, Bombay Millowners and the Debate over Housing Bombay's Millworkers, 1896–1918," *Essays in Economic and Business History* 30 (2012): 105–23.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>77</sup>Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum*, 10.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, my emphasis.

housing as a product of historical and governmental processes showed how it was naturalized in official and popular discourses in the early twentieth century. This section builds on these arguments to further problematize the housing question through the lens of real estate.

Most urbanists tend to deploy “housing” and “real estate” interchangeably in their discussions, thus obscuring their specific connotations. Recently, Alexia Yates has made a compelling case for why global urban history should be read via the histories of real estate. She points out that real estate “as a physical entity, a field of interests, and a mode of capital accumulation, has been a central force in cities throughout the modern era.”<sup>79</sup> For Yates, real estate reifies social relationships in a manner that concepts like “landscape,” “urban fabric,” and “built environment” cannot. One could effectively argue that Chhabria’s deployment of “housing” and Yates’ “real estate” are equally useful for understanding the historical transformation of cities into spaces of capitalist accumulation. Instead, though, I posit that the etymology of “real estate” opens new ways of seeing the “double life”<sup>80</sup> of housing in the context of twentieth-century Indian urbanism. Real estate entered common-law discourses in the seventeenth century to distinguish immovable property from “money, merchandise, or other goods.”<sup>81</sup> Maitland made a similar argument in 1904 where he observed, “To this very day we are incumbered with those terms ‘real property’ and ‘personal property,’ which serve us as approximate equivalents for *Liegenschaft* (immovable property) and *Fahrnis* (movable property).”<sup>82</sup> In other words, real property “is ‘real’ and protected in a way that movable personal property is not.”<sup>83</sup>

Seeing that the improvement trust drove the official land valuer and private investors to undertake predictive valuations of houses that were not yet constructed, *and therefore not real*, this section analyzes how the *realness* of real estate was holding up in this climate of “unrestricted, wild, and greedy speculation.”<sup>84</sup> Further, it reads this concept of housing *as* real estate alongside Nikhil Rao’s argument that BIT managed Bombay “as a set of commodified and fungible spaces.”<sup>85</sup> Adding to Rao, I posit that studying the housing question through the lens of real estate allows us to view the two-fold existence of urban property, as both material asset and fungible commodity.

The spatio-temporal distinctions between the charitable trust and the improvement trust are most evident in the domain of real estate. Leilah Vevaina writes, “The real estate managed by a charitable trust can be seen as a negative space, as it forecloses most possibilities of sale or alternative use. Once registered with the commission, these lands are potentially held outside market circulation and forever for a certain purpose.”<sup>86</sup> The assets held by the charitable trust are “real” because they

<sup>79</sup> Alexia Yates, *Real Estate and Global Urban History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>80</sup> I borrow this phrase from Alexia Yates’ observation about property’s capacity “to exist as a material, productive entity at the same time as it can support circulating signs representing its value”; “The Double Life of Property: Mobilizing Land and Making Capitalism in Modern France,” *Critical Historical Studies* 6, 2 (2019): 247–78, 254.

<sup>81</sup> Yates, *Real Estate*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Maitland, “Corporation Sole,” 78.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>84</sup> Richards, *Condition*, 430.

<sup>85</sup> Rao, *House*, 24.

<sup>86</sup> Vevaina, *Trust Matters*, 5.

have been shielded from the vortex of limitless circulation and commodification *in perpetuity*. By contrast, the improvement trust produced a market in urban property where privately owned lands could be acquired and redeveloped for public use, and speculation conjured value into empty spaces whose future potential was invisible and unknowable by any tangible metric of valuation. As with anything held in perpetuity, charitable trusts engender stability and certainty, whereas the short-term objectives of the improvement trust injected the housing market with a sense of constant urgency and volatility. Improvement had to be rapid *not* to secure the city from imminent crises but because speculation could otherwise inflate the values of land and buildings exponentially. In reality, the rumor of acquisitions sent house owners scrambling to extract the best value for their properties. Landlords who had previously declared lower rents to reduce their tax burden now took to compulsive rack renting to extract better compensations in case their property came under the hammer. These stalling tactics of private landholders slowed down the rapidity of acquisition considerably. In 1909, Orr noted that the value of a land in Bombay had shot up from 19 to 27 lakhs (about US\$22,000–31,000 today) in three years since the notification of acquisition was first circulated.<sup>87</sup> The improvement trust had already worsened the cities' congestion problem; by "inadvertently" raising the market value of houses, it now pushed the cities to the edge of unlivability.

The issue around land mobilization highlighted how a fixed asset such as landed property could be territorially disembedded and sold in the present at a projected valuation of its future worth. "What should we make of the fact," Ivan Ascher asks us, "that even our *promises* are now being made only to be "sold" or otherwise exchanged, as if mere buying and selling of financial assets were sufficient to turn an uncertain future into a source of security in the present?"<sup>88</sup> Here, the reference to land mobilization expands upon Yates' study of real property being channeled into the regime of capitalist circulation in early nineteenth-century France.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, Ascher's question helps us investigate how finance has modeled our social relationships—through predictions, rather than productions—in a post-Marxian world.<sup>90</sup> The spatial and temporal scope of the two propositions—both posited from metropolitan centers of nineteenth-century France and the twenty-first-century United States—establish the longstanding relationship between land and financialization even as the instruments, imaginations, and vocabularies anchoring this relationship transformed (and persisted) over these centuries. The speculation surrounding Bombay and Calcutta's land market stands halfway between these episodes, confirming two key observations. One, it highlights that financialization of land was not merely a metropolitan phenomenon but constituted an important extractive tactic of imperial governance. Two, it proves that land financialization has historically produced urban spaces by generating tensions between movable and

<sup>87</sup> Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 22. A lakh is a hundred thousand.

<sup>88</sup> Ivan Ascher, *Portfolio Society: On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction* (New York: Zone Books, 2016), 14, his emphasis.

<sup>89</sup> Yates, "Double Life of Property."

<sup>90</sup> Ascher's reading of financialization is rooted in the Marxian tradition of critique. He attempts to creatively read Karl Marx's *Capital, Volume 1* to analyze two recent developments "that Marx could not have anticipated": the rise in financial markets since the financial crisis of 2008 and the concurrent rise in "portfolio society." Ascher moves away from modes of production to understand how modes of prediction define social relations in the twenty-first century; *Portfolio Society*, 10.

immovable property, fixed space and circulating capital, and abstraction and materiality.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, it suggests that the concept of “speculative urbanism,” which has recently gained traction among urban geographers as a central feature of neoliberal cities, has a long, uneven history that has often been obscured in recent scholarship by a singular focus on contemporary developments.<sup>92</sup>

The financialization of real estate under the improvement trust privileged the asset’s exchange value over the use value experienced by owners and residents. The trust was not alone in this; private investors also participated in this orgiastic ritual of limitless exchange in pursuit of higher and higher profits to the detriment of small landholders and poor tenants. In so doing, the trust highlighted the incommensurability between those who bore the burden of financialization and those whose lives improved because of it. By displacing the “real” value of a home as an intimate domestic space, speculation turned real estate into mere fiction. But was real estate a specter from the speculators’ futuristic projections? Shabnum Tejani’s argument about the arbitrary nature of BIT’s market valuation reveals a small crack in this relentless cycle of circulating sign-values. Since disputes over the market value of assets routinely ran into legal arbitration, judges mandated that “the market value had to be determined ‘by sales of similar land in the neighborhood.’”<sup>93</sup> The practice of looking at “real” neighborhood properties rather than speculative offers to arrive at the “best market value” shows that the fictions of real estate were still somewhat rooted in concrete and durable infrastructures.

If speculation as a “technology of imagination”<sup>94</sup> tossed real estate into a slot machine of financial possibilities, the subject of rent recentered it into the material domain of life and livelihood. The definition of rent in classical political economy as a payment received against possession of a monopoly asset was wholly contingent on the physical attributes of the property and its location.<sup>95</sup> From assessing the value of properties to rehousing displaced populations, the trust took rent as a centerpiece that informed all its redevelopment decisions. Once CIT began acquisitions, landlords who had previously declared lower rents to reduce taxes now rack rented to improve their property valuations. Richards observed, “There is always (or should be) a distinct ratio between the rateable value and the rent of a property. It is very difficult indeed in India to ascertain what is the real rent being paid for a property. Reticence, fear, intrigue, intimidation by landlord, farming, and re-farming of rents, natural inability to tell the truth, all created insuperable difficulties.”<sup>96</sup> Richard’s complaint that Indian landlords were corrupt and disingenuous points to the

<sup>91</sup>Yates, “Double Life of Property”, 250.

<sup>92</sup>See “Special Issue: Unleashing Speculative Urbanism,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 55, 2 (2023). For a bibliographic survey of the field, see Ashima Sood, “Speculative Urbanism,” in Anthony M. Orum, ed., *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies* (London: Blackwell, 2019).

<sup>93</sup>Tejani, “Disputing ‘Market Value,’” 583.

<sup>94</sup>I borrow this phrase from Laura Bear, for whom capitalism is motivated by technologies of imagination that fuel speculation. She writes, “The imaginative style of capitalism is future-oriented speculation or the attempt to divine and manipulate the visible and invisible aspect of human and non-human productivity.” In “Capitalist Divination: Popularist Speculators and Technologies of Imagination on the Hooghly River,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35, 3 (2015): 408–23, 409.

<sup>95</sup>Both David Ricardo and Adam Smith emphasize the monopolistic nature of private landholding, which by default made rent from such property its “natural” monopoly price.

<sup>96</sup>Richards, *Condition*, 416.



challenges that such perceived “immoral” tendencies posed to those trying to assess property’s “real” rental value. Richards was not alone in this view; rentierism has historically been critiqued as a vestige of the feudal order that extracts value out of a scarce asset without doing any hard work. In sharp contrast to the capitalist entrepreneur who “produces via innovation,” the slothful rentier is despised for enjoying his “unearned” income from landed inheritance.<sup>97</sup>

The confusion surrounding “real” rent significantly impaired the trust’s acquisition work. The work of rehousing evictees threw up other challenges, and Orr grimly observed the difficulty of finding sanitary accommodations for the displaced at affordable rents that still left the trust with “a reasonable margin of profit.”<sup>98</sup> Rehousing was not a uniquely colonial problem, and London administrators were similarly challenged to rehouse the working class without incurring a heavy loss.<sup>99</sup> While the trust could do little to redeem the culture of rentierism or turn rehousing into a profitable venture, its original resolve to construct sanitary *public* housing for the working class meant that the trust was the city’s official landlord. Recoupment had already clinched its role as the official developer *and* realtor and with public housing the trust entered the world of rentier capitalism as well.

Two years before CIT’s official establishment, the sub-committee reviewing the Calcutta Improvement Bill wrote to the president of the Bengal Chamber clarifying that the future trust intended to *own* the city’s redeveloped housing. The sub-committee maintained, “while we are of opinion that private enterprise should certainly have every opportunity of building, we think there are obvious advantages in the Improvement Trust retaining possession.”<sup>100</sup> BIT was similarly permitted to develop land and “enjoy what rents they could make out of it for 99 years.”<sup>101</sup> If there was an obvious irony in the public trust becoming a usurious rentier, perhaps its experts hoped the rhetoric of improvement would set it apart from the “parasitic” landlord and camouflage its profit-seeking intentions.

The trust’s steadfast refusal to dissociate profitability from its general improvement schemes meant that its work in all three departments—acquisition, demolition, and rehousing—*was designed to fail*. Extant literature has routinely emphasized the failures of the improvement trusts to ultimately bring relief to urban populations. Such analyses work on the assumption that the government as a non-profit organization would strive to prioritize the wellness of its citizens, even at considerable financial costs. The improvement trust’s legal constitution, financial motivations, and term of contract as a “one-time intervention,” however, suggest that neither profitability nor limitless accumulation was ever beyond its horizon of expectation.

<sup>97</sup>Brett Christophers, “The Problem of Rent,” *Critical Historical Studies* 6, 2 (2019): 303–23. From being called parasitic, indolent, functionless, and unproductive to being blamed for reaping what they never sowed and living off the fat of the land, by the twentieth century rentiers had come to symbolize the antithesis of enterprise, productivity, and innovation. See especially pp. 310–11.

<sup>98</sup>Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 13.

<sup>99</sup>Richards, *Condition*, 361.

<sup>100</sup>Letter from Sub-committee, Calcutta Improvement Scheme to President and Committee of the Chamber, 23 Nov. 1910, 457.

<sup>101</sup>Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 25.

## Conclusion

This paper has deployed a comparative framework to revisit some of the key arguments articulated by historians of the Indian improvement trusts. It has taken Glasgow as the starting point to understand how a metropolitan model of city improvement trust was adopted to address urban crises in colonial cities. I have discussed the workings of the first two colonial trusts in Bombay and Calcutta to show how the contingent nature of their operations created a blueprint for urban governance in the decades that followed. Incidentally, the next improvement trust was established outside India, in Singapore in 1927 under the chairmanship of CIT's former chief engineer, E. P. Richards. Therefrom, it traveled to Lahore and Delhi in 1936–1937 before being adopted en masse in cities and townships across India long after independence. The analogy of travel is instructive here to emphasize that much like the contagion which spurred the establishment of these trusts, “improvement,” too, became a well-traveled idea that irrevocably transformed—for better or worse—the social and economic lives of its recipients over the course of the twentieth century.

My argument about BIT and CIT inaugurating an “improvement regime” in the early twentieth century has developed from two key observations. First, the operations of BIT and CIT worked by means of a system of replication, using similar technologies of innovation to deliver “public good.” This should not lead us to believe that the improvement trust produced a generic “placelessness” that obscured the historical specificities of its respective urban locations.<sup>102</sup> Rather, it asserts that the place—informed by its distinct political and ecological landscape and its heterogeneous public—inflected the improvement trust's strategies in novel ways until they were reproduced in other locations resulting in sometimes different but often very similar outcomes. This constant tension between the standardizing zeal of the colonial authorities and the myriad interests of colonial-subject beneficiaries prevented the improvement regime from importing a uniform logic to its operations. The second observation is that, despite BIT having worsened Bombay's sanitation and congestion problems, it was replicated in Calcutta. Why was that so, and why did the improvement trust routinely take on the primary responsibility of improving cities, superseding the powers of the municipality? As I have shown here, the legal instrumentality of the improvement trust enabled it to shake off the deliberative inertia of the municipality and replace it with an “efficient” technocracy with limited electoral and financial liabilities. Rather than holding the trust accountable to its immediate objectives, this observation opens up new ways of thinking about the trust as the harbinger of a new governmental rationality in the twentieth century. The standard logic to the trust was revealed through its profit-making tactics, which leads us to question why a fiduciary organization instituted by the government, with apparently altruistic motives, mirrored the profiteering sensibilities of a joint stock company.

<sup>102</sup>Over the last decade, urban theorists and practitioners working on and from the Global South have advanced a robust critique of “applying” theory from the Global North onto spaces in the South. These works have highlighted the importance of “place” as the site for theory-building, rather than as a field for empirical data collection. See Gautam Bhan, “Notes on a Southern Urban Practice,” *Environment and Urbanization* 31, 2 (2019): 639–54; Ananya Roy, “What Is Urban about Critical Urban Theory?” *Urban Geography* 37, 6 (2016): 810–23; Eric Sheppard, Helga Leitner, and Anant Maringanti, “Provincializing Global Urbanism: A Manifesto,” *Urban Geography* 34, 7 (2013): 893–900.

Let me briefly return to the evening of Bompas' felicitation at the Royal Society of Arts. After he finished speaking, audience members took turns to praise his administrative zeal that "brought the idea of individual sacrifice for public good home to every man in Calcutta."<sup>103</sup> In a room full of retired and current civil servants, Bompas was quite reasonably feeling at home. Unsurprisingly, no one spoke of chief engineer E. P. Richards, and the services of CIT's experts were mentioned in only one oblique reference. Hugh L. Stephenson said, "The spade-work might largely have been done by engineers and valuers, but the direction and driving power were in the personality of Mr. Bompas."<sup>104</sup> Stephenson was slated to become the Governor of Bihar in the following year. Also seated among the society's many illustrious dignitaries was none other than J. P. Orr, former chairman of BIT and Bompas' long-time colleague from their time in India. Like Bompas, Orr had retired from the trust after a decade's service. Upon learning that Calcutta had experienced "the same course of events" as Bombay, Orr turned the discussion toward "whether it might not be advisable to entrust the improvement of London to a London Improvement Trust."<sup>105</sup> While my research has discovered no such London Improvement Trust, Orr's proposal nevertheless helps the improvement regime come full circle, having started in Glasgow, moved through Bombay and Calcutta, to finally end up in London. It harks back to the early nineteenth-century tradition of liberal imperialism that viewed India as a "laboratory" for governmental experiments, which upon successful execution "could make their way back to England."<sup>106</sup> Orr's advice gestured at how Bombay and Calcutta, having "bettered" the Glasgow model, could now facilitate London's civic improvement.

Following the natural completion of their tenure or owing to their repeated failures, like clockwork, each of these improvement trusts was either incorporated back into the municipality and/or morphed into another "development" organization. In 1919 CIT outsourced its work to an autonomously run Development Board, in 1920 the Government of Bombay set up a new Development Directorate, and in 1957 the Delhi Improvement Trust made way for the Delhi Development Authority.<sup>107</sup> The substitution of "development boards" for "improvement trusts" did not happen by accident. Rather, it reveals a systemic shift in governmental thinking from improvement to development by the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>108</sup> Recent ethnographies on the still-functional Delhi Development Authority speak of the neoliberalization of the urban landscape, complete with the steady depoliticization of the urban government, the privatization of development projects, and the rapid scale

<sup>103</sup>Quote from Mr. S. N. Mullik, quoted in Bompas, "Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust," 216.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 219.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 217.

<sup>106</sup>Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 29.

<sup>107</sup>The list is even longer: Lahore instituted the Lahore Development Authority in 1975, replacing the Lahore Improvement Trust; Singapore Improvement Trust became the Housing Development Board in 1960.

<sup>108</sup>Stephen Legg has traced the shift in governmental rationality from the Delhi Improvement Trust to the Delhi Development Authority through the (dis)continuities in colonial governmental rationality in a postcolonial context; "Postcolonial Developmentalities: From the Delhi Improvement Trust to the Delhi Development Authority," in Sarswati Raju, M. Satish Kumar, and Stuart Corbret *et al.*, eds., *Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies of India* (London: Sage, 2006), 182–204. A comparative analysis of the *conceptual shift* from improvement to development across Indian cities is yet to be undertaken.

of selective urbanization achieved through instruments of land financialization.<sup>109</sup> This is true of all “world-class cities” in today’s India, which have met with similar fates. This paper is an invitation to think about these developments, not as neoliberal inventions, but a (dis)continuous unraveling of a century-old improvement regime.

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<sup>109</sup> Asher E. Gartner, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Thomas Cowan, *Subaltern Frontiers: Agrarian City-Making in Gurgaon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Sushmita Pati, *Properties of Rent: Community, Capital, and Politics in Globalising Delhi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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