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World-Class City Making

PICTURING THE FUTURE

In millennial Delhi, talk of the world-class city was everywhere. The new Delhi Master Plan emerged with the explicit goal of transforming Delhi into a world-class city. The chief minister inaugurated every state ceremony with reference to this imagined future, and city residents were constantly reminded of this impending transformation of self and city through the media's campaign to prepare them for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, hosted by Delhi, and other mega-events promised to follow. But how do you make a world-class city?

According to A. K. Jain, the commissioner of planning in the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), "making Delhi a world-class city means building high quality sports facilities, creating a clean environment, and beautification of the city."[1] The minister of state for finance and planning proclaimed: "The urban planning of Delhi entails providing the city with adequate and quality urban and civic infrastructure to bring it on par with most developed metropolises of the world."[2] Broadly construed, a world-class city is an idealized vision of a modern, privatized, and slum-free city assembled from transnationally circulating images of other so-called global cities. "Delhi might one day compete with the urban waterfront of London or Paris," read one headline. "Delhi will be among world's top 10 cities, says Mayor," pronounced another.[3] As Partha Chatterjee writes, "this idea of the new post-industrial globalized metropolis" was heavily influenced by "the intensified circulation of images of global cities through cinema, television, and the internet as well as through the Indian middle classes' far greater access to international travel."[4]

But the world-class city is more than a mental image. It is also a set of material processes, part of a speculative project of attracting capital investment and fixing it in (and in turn fixing) the city. In India, this is a project executed largely through the valorization of the land market and by constructing urban real estate as an undervalued asset, ready to be tapped as a frontier of capitalist growth. It is thus no coincidence that state officials and politicians began articulating the goal of turning Delhi into a slum-free city and giving it a world-class look at the precise moment when the government sought to liberalize the land market by converting what it called "underutilized" public land, including that occupied by informal slum settlements, into commercially exploitable private property.[5]

This chapter discusses the processes underlying this transformation of land-as-the-material-basis-of-shelter and -production into real estate—a financial instrument for producing profit through the commodification of space.[6] But to draw in an audience willing to invest in Indian real estate, the government's claim of underutilized land had to be referenced to a higher potential use. That is, a vision of a higher value future was required to transform action in the present. I focus here on a powerful technology that the real estate industry and the Indian state has used for picturing such a future: poverty projections.

In recent years, private think tanks and consulting firms, most notably McKinsey & Company, have used proprietary economic models to produce figures predicting an imminent boom in the size of what they call "the great Indian middle class." These figures have circulated widely in investor reports, the business press, and mutual fund prospectuses, presenting a predicted decrease in poverty as a sign of rising consumer demand. Poverty projections, like all predictive models, are devices that organize thoughts, feelings, and actions by constituting fields for future intervention.[7] Predictions of future income levels and consumer purchasing power hence create visions of economic possibility, encouraging real estate developers and investors to make risk calculations according to their current market position. Expectations of rising consumer demand suggest that current supply is inadequate or will become inadequate in the near future. This reading of scarcity in the present triggers rising land valuations and pressure to increase land supply—slums are bulldozed, public land auctioned, and urban peripheries expanded. While economic conditions in the present are the presumed foundation of projections of the future, it is the vision of that possible future, crystallized in the image, that directs present action. In other words, as the possibility of a foretold outcome takes shape, affect accrues in the projections themselves.[8]

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As this occurs, a strange displacement can unfold: the importance of present economic conditions, which presumably undergird the projection, recedes. What matters now is the future, and how present action is oriented toward that future. Simply put, the projected image (e.g., a curve showing falling poverty, rising mortgage rates, or inverted bond yields) seems to stand on its own, *pointing to the future*, not to the conditions of its making. This is especially true when the measures of present conditions are difficult to interpret on their own, are opaque or concealed behind complicated technical exercises, are produced by bodies of experts whose calculations are considered reliable, or are based on large and complicated datasets that are updated only every so often.[9] Such is the case with poverty projections, which require massive datasets and chains of assumptions to generate a stable picture of poverty, and which expert bodies spend months or years assembling. Given these conditions, the picture in question, once formed, stands almost on its own, with even greater affective intensity than other images: it has an underlying meaning (its presumed relation to the data that produced it), but that meaning is either inaccessible to the viewer or, at the least, secondary to the larger story it tells. In the case of poverty projections, it is the connection between field measures of material conditions in the country, such as the nutritional status of the population, and the picture of poverty that recedes, while the story that picture tells—of a prosperous economic future, for example—expands, like a myth.

This chapter proceeds by describing recent changes in India's land market and the importance of poverty trends in shaping confidence in this market, after which I turn to this almost mythical character of poverty projections—that is, the way they become unanchored from their original referents and point to the future. By contrasting McKinsey's figures predicting a poverty-free future with estimates based on government surveys that show persistent deprivation, I show poverty lines to be aesthetic as much as they are calculative. This points to how central image work is to the project of world-class city making, the various contradictions of which I turn to in the rest of the book.

REAL ESTATE AS SPECULATIVE VEHICLE

Until the late 1990s, Delhi's land was managed by a policy of socialized land. As codified in the Delhi Master Plan, this policy had three main components. First, according to the Delhi Development Act (1957), the DDA was granted monopoly control over the acquisition, development, and disposal of all urban land. This defined land in Delhi as *public* and was arguably the largest land nationalization program in the history of urban India.[10]

Empowering the DDA to acquire more than 35,000 acres of land through the Land Acquisition Act, the policy was initiated specifically to prevent forms of land speculation that had begun to impede new emigrants' access to affordable housing. Second, Delhi had no formal private property system, as all land was leased from the state, and all private land sales had to be deemed to be in the public interest before receiving approval. Third, the Master Plan entitled the poorest income classes to 25 percent of residential units in the city.[11]

In 1991, India began a gradual process of economic liberalization, devaluing the rupee, lifting import restrictions, privatizing state-run enterprises, and more generally dismantling the instruments of the command economy. In the mid-1990s, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the US Agency for International Development, and a host of private consultancies began publishing reports highlighting the central role of the land market in putting India on track to a high-growth future. By deregulating this market and inserting once-public land into the marketplace, the Indian economy, so these institutions argued, would not only be able to mobilize a huge reserve of untapped capital, but also attract foreign investment—a necessary step to finance cities' world-class infrastructure needs.[12] The World Bank's India Urban Strategy Paper thus states that the preliberalized system of land administration "effectively 'froze' large blocks of the urban capital stock," creating "a shortage of basic infrastructure capital." It did not, however, acknowledge that this "frozen" land, outside of a formal system of property and therefore largely inaccessible to property developers, housed more than 50 percent of Delhi's population in squatter and unauthorized settlements—a pattern similar in most Indian cities.[13]

Making Indian cities more bankable—that is, transforming urban land into capital—required aggressive land reform, the only means by which India would be able to meet and sustain high rates of GDP growth (the stated goal of the central government since the mid-1990s was maintaining an annual growth rate of at least 8 percent).[14] As the World Bank wrote, "idle GOI [Government of India] land holdings or constraints on land usage in many cities—such as public land holdings or encroached infrastructure—often represent an enormous 'implicit tax.' This tax corresponds to the foregone imputed rent that could have accrued to residents of the city." Public land, so the story went, was undervalued and underutilized; this "forgone imputed rent" represented a new investment frontier, a new source of potential profit that could be capitalized. Generating capital in the city—and thus national economic growth, since urban centers contribute more than 60 percent of India's GDP—required privatizing urban land.[15]

The McKinsey Global Institute, the economic research arm of McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm that is one of the major players in economic reform debates in India, took this argument a step further when it published a more than 700-page, bottom-up study of "the barriers to productivity and output growth" in India. Noting, in 2001, that India's GDP "is growing at a mere six per cent a year, compared to China's ten per cent," McKinsey argued that "with the right new policies, GDP growth of 10 per cent per year is within India's reach." Shunning common economic arguments about the causes of restricted growth rates, McKinsey's report, titled *India: The Growth Imperative*, claimed that product and land market barriers were the greatest hindrance to India's growth—not the country's fiscal deficit, capital market distortions, restrictive labor laws, or poor infrastructure, as economists commonly argued.[16]

Emphasizing the need for land market deregulation, the report, the advisory committee for which included high ranking members of India's Ministry of Finance, claimed that across all industries, "we found that product and land market barriers are four to five times more likely than government ownership to constrain output growth" (82). Overall, McKinsey calculated that "land market distortions account for close to 1.3 per cent of lost [GDP] growth a year" (7). These distortions included unclear ownership, counterproductive taxation and inflexible zoning, and rent and tenancy laws. Boosting its overall argument, the report gave the example of the retail sector, asserting that "allowing FDI [foreign direct investment] and removing land market barriers will allow retail supermarkets to increase productivity more than four-fold from the current 20 per cent to almost 90 per cent of US levels in 10 years" (69). It further showed that 75 percent of the barrier to labor productivity in the construction sector was caused by land market distortions (111).

One of McKinsey's major recommendations logically extended from this analysis: to make land procurement easier for private firms, which would increase investment and competition in *all* economic sectors. Coupled with other deregulations, it said that land privatization "will allow India to achieve a growth rate of 10 per cent a year" (182). The sentiment that land-use laws stifled urban development was (and still is) widely shared within the real estate industry, which read the state's policies to protect the poor from displacement from public land as a misplaced subsidy that detered the true driver of poverty reduction: growth. As Rajiv Singh, the vice chairman of DLF—India's largest developer, which also built the DLF Emporio mall shown in Figure I.1—announced:

> The whole system was not and still is not geared to rapid provisioning of infrastructure. There's too much political freedom, too many legal rights, too much media. By contrast, I was in Shanghai recently and one day passed a bunch of huts beside the road. The next day they were all gone. The third day there were a bunch of guys rolling out sod and

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> The whole system was not and still is not geared to rapid provisioning of infrastructure. There's too much political freedom, too many legal rights, too much media. By contrast, I was in Shanghai recently and one day passed a bunch of huts beside the road. The next day they were all gone. The third day there were a bunch of guys rolling out sod and

> planting trees. And on the fourth day they inaugurated a park. In India they first debate everything.[17]

In a more technocratic register than Singh's flippant call to replace slum huts with parks, McKinsey justified the need for capital generation via land privatization through a diagram titled "International Benchmarks for Investment Rates," which it used to imply that India's relatively low rate of GDP growth (5.8 percent) through the 1990s was related to its low level of investment as a percentage of overall GDP (24.5 percent). China (32.9 percent), Indonesia (27.5 percent), and other emerging markets on a higher growth trajectory, it showed, had much higher rates of investment. Increasing investment, and foreign direct investment in particular, was necessary to increase GDP, and privatization and monetization of the land market was one of the most important strategies to bring this about.[18] A. K. Jain of the DDA echoed this sentiment when he said of Delhi, "until land is used as a resource—a precious commodity—we won't achieve the goal of planned development, meaning a city free of slums."[19] McKinsey more recently affirmed that land monetization must be a central strategy for funding urban investment in India, given the country's low per capita income and municipal tax revenue, if it is to avoid urban crisis.[20] It is in this light that a series of land market reforms initiated in the late 1990s and deepened in the 2000s should be seen as efforts to transform land into a new financial instrument: real estate.

Once the goal of spurring economic growth and competing for foreign investment with other emerging markets had been solidified as both national and city-level policy priorities, land market liberalization began in Delhi. In 1999 the DDA launched its first commercial auctions, selling un- or underused land (e.g., parks, vacant land, wedding grounds) that it had acquired for public purposes in order to generate revenue and to encourage capital investment in the city.[21] In 2000, the DDA initiated its Freehold Conversion Program, which allowed leaseholders to obtain legal title to their land, thereby setting in place a system of private property relations—that is, land could be bought and sold in an unregulated market—for the first time since the DDA was established. In 2001 the DDA passed a new Cooperative Housing Society Policy, which created a direct avenue by which land allocated to associations of private users at below-market rates could be sold on the market. In 2003, the chief minister of Delhi proclaimed that the World Bank's "vision document" would become the guideline for urban governance in Delhi, which called for a rapid increase in foreign investment into real estate. Finally, in April 2005 the central government opened the real estate and construction sectors to 100 percent foreign direct investment, previously capped at 40 percent. When the Delhi Master Plan 2021 was approved in 2007, stating "Vision-2021 is to make Delhi a global metropolis and a world-class city," it cleared the books of the last remnants of the policy of socialized land by deleting the central passages mandating land reservations for the urban poor.[22]

CONJURING THE WORLD-CLASS FUTURE

Besides creating the conditions through which investors could access the land market, constructing this market as one ripe for high growth required the mobilization of new speculative discourses.[23] Markets run on hype and fear as much as fundamentals, and, as in all speculative enterprises, "profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors."[24] How was a high-growth future conjured for the land market and the Indian economy more generally?

Conjuring a world-class future requires putting in place a compelling urban vision that will attract foreign capital, encourage rising valuations of existing capital stock, *and* produce a citizenry desirous of cities in which they can enjoy the benefits of world-class consumption and lifestyle. As economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller write, "high confidence tends to be associated with inspirational stories, stories about new business initiatives, tales of how others are getting rich."[25] Indian GDP, as a result of the economy's structural makeup and demographics, is overwhelmingly driven by private consumption; it made up approximately 60 percent of GDP in the mid-2000s, a much higher number than in other developing countries, such as China (~40 percent).[26] The most logical means to construct compelling growth stories favorable to long-term capital appreciation thus lay in depicting long run increases in domestic consumption. Herein entered the role of the middle class and a dominant narrative of socioeconomic transformation in India.

The story—told consistently in newspaper accounts, by politicians, and by economists banking on the Indian boom—goes something like this: India has historically been a poor country, with cripplingly high rates of poverty leaving most of the population living hand to mouth. In 1991, India began a gradual process of economic reforms, leading to a jump in economic growth for much of the 1990s and an additional boost in growth by the mid-2000s, which led it to surpass all other nations except China. With growth, so too has come a decline in poverty, and the poor are gradually morphing into a new middle class that is poised to catapult India into the ranks of the world's economic leaders. As one report proclaimed, "the Indian economy is growing from strength to strength. The fast-paced economic growth is bringing about a change in India's socioeconomic fabric. It is creating more jobs, fuelling aspirations and leading consumers to spend more."[27] Rising middle-class consumption in such accounts both symbolizes the positive effects of economic liberalization and serves as the anticipated driver of future growth. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invoked the booming middle class in an effort to woo Saudi investors when he said: "Today, India's economy is on the move. For three years, we have witnessed growth rates of between 7.0 percent and 8.5 percent. A growing market, with a large middle class, abundant raw materials, highly trained and skilled manpower, especially in the field of science and technology, is thirsting for new investment."[28]

Leading the charge in narrating an impending explosion in the growth of the middle class were a series of proprietary datasets that constructed scenarios relating India's class composition to GDP growth. Prominent among these was the National Council of Applied Economic Research's (NCAER) report called "The Great Indian Middle Class," which was based on a marketing survey that divided the Indian population into eight income groups called the Deprived, Aspirers, Seekers, Strivers, Near Rich, Clear Rich, Sheer Rich, and Super Rich. The NCAER's rhetorical slight of hand should already be evident, as four of the eight group names included the word "rich," three signified upward mobility, and only one ("the deprived") suggested poverty. In 2005, the four categories of the rich added up to less than 1 percent of total households, making clear the irony of the NCAER's imagined class hierarchy (see Table 1.1).

Despite the near numerical absence of rich people in India, the NCAER's decision to switch away from standard income quintiles or deciles (i.e., evenly distributed categories) and to depict most class categories as

Table 1.1. THE GREAT INDIAN MARKET?

NCAER Name	Annual Income ('000 rupees)	1995 (%)	2002 (%)	2005 (%)	2010* (%)
Deprived	<90	80	72	65	52
Aspireres	91–200	18	22	26	34
Seekers	201–500	2	5	6	10
Strivers	501–1,000	0.4	1	2	3
Near Rich	1001–2,000	0.11	0.29	0.55	1.07
Clear Rich	2001–5,000	0.04	0.11	0.22	0.47
Sheer Rich	5001–10,000	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.11
Super Rich	10,000+	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.06

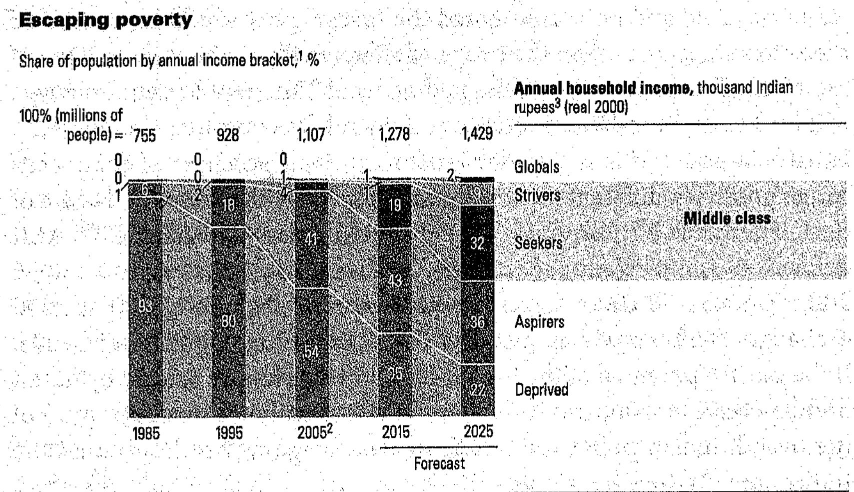
Source: NCAER. 2005. "The Great Indian Market: Results from the NCAER's Market Information Survey of Households." New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research.
*Data for 2010 were projected.[83]

yet-to-be-filled and rich represented the first of what would be a series of rhetorical steps to conjure the image of an upwardly mobile future. One of the NCAER report's main findings thus read: "The rapid rise in incomes will lead to an even faster increase in demand for consumer durables. . . . What will power this is the increased usage [and purchase of these consumer goods] in different income classes coupled with the rise in the size of the Great Indian Middle Class."[29] Yet the middle class—which the NCAER defined as the seekers and strivers, or households that earn between 200,000 and 1,000,000 rupees per year (around $4,500–22,000 at 2000 exchange rates)—made up just over 8 percent of the population in 2005. If the growth potential of the Indian economy was largely gauged by future middle-class demand, and if the middle class was but a small minority of the overall Indian population, as these data suggest, then how could the Indian growth story sustain itself?

In 2007, McKinsey fed the NCAER's data through a proprietary econometric model to predict India's class distribution in 2025. Its report, called *Bird of Gold: The Rise of India's Consumer Class*, claimed that "over the next two decades, the country's middle class will grow from about 5 percent of the population to more than 40 percent and create the world's fifth-largest consumer market." It went on to say: "The same furious energy that made India a world-class provider of software and business services is creating a huge urban middle class."[30] McKinsey simplified the NCAER income categories by renaming the four categories of rich into a single group that it termed Globals, but did so in a way that generated results even more favorable to a rising middle class. Whereas the NCAER had found that the deprived made up 65 percent of the population of India in 2005, McKinsey claimed:

> In 1985 93 percent of the population lived on a household income of less than 90,000 rupees per year [the deprived], or about a dollar per person per day; by 2005 that proportion had been cut nearly in half, to 54 percent. We project that if India can achieve 7.3 percent annual growth over the next 20 years, 465 million more people will be spared a life of extreme deprivation.[31]

As the chart called "Escaping Poverty" shows (reprinted here as Figure 1.1), McKinsey predicted that these 465 million people would move up the imagined income ladder, swelling the ranks of the middle class and leaving only 22 percent of the population deprived by 2025. According to this model, then, the vast pool of low-income people in India today represents a future investment opportunity: poor people are portrayed as future rich people. As McKinsey wrote, investment "opportunities will blossom as millions of first-time buyers step up to cash registers," causing aggregate



[1] Annual income: globals = >1,000,000 rupees; strivers = 500,000–1,000,000; seekers = 200,000–499,999; aspirers = 90,000–199,999; deprived = <90,000; figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.
[2] Estimated.
[3] 45.7 rupees = $1 in real 2000 dollars or 8.5 rupees = $1 adjusted for purchasing power parity.

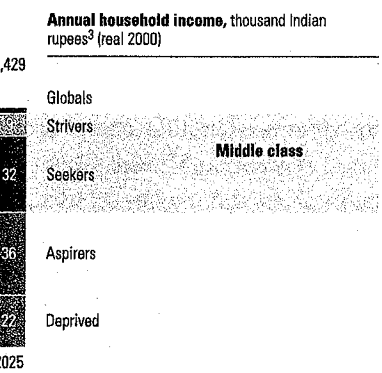
Source: McKinsey Global Institute analysis

Figure 1.1. Exact reprint of exhibit 2 from "Tracking the Growth of India's Middle Class," McKinsey & Company (2007). Reprinted by permission.

consumer demand to quadruple by 2025.[32] Incorporating the NCAER's definition of the middle class (i.e., the seekers and strivers), McKinsey's model found that:

> By 2025 a continuing rise in personal incomes will spur a tenfold increase enlarging the middle class to about 583 million people, or 41 percent of the population. . . . About 400 million Indian city dwellers—a group nearly 100 million people larger than the current population of the United States—will belong to households with a comfortable standard of living.[33]

According to McKinsey, the ranks of the aspirers and seekers, those households earning between 90,000 and 500,000 rupees per year, had swelled to 45 percent of the population by 2005, whereas the NCAER had found only 32 percent. Despite the fact that the NCAER data include estimates for 2005, McKinsey chose to ignore this most recent time point and instead deployed its own 2005 numbers—again, the model producing these numbers was proprietary, making it unavailable to public scrutiny. The rapid fall in the size of the deprived from 1995 to 2005 allowed McKinsey to project even more positive future trends, painting a picture in which India's poor masses were on the verge of transforming into a new consuming class—one with the means to leave their *jhuggis*, tenements, and joint family homes in favor of monthly mortgage payments in new



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private developments. As Llrena Searle notes, the NCAER and McKinsey data were widely reproduced in the media and in real estate prospectuses through the mid-2000s, spinning this imagined demographic transformation as one of India's growth fundamentals, what *BusinessWeek* called a "seismic wave of income growth."[34]

And, according to investment numbers, the conjuring of a future middle class worked. By 2007, the "animal spirits" of private corporations—a term John Maynard Keynes used to account for "the spontaneous urge to action" premised on confidence and belief "rather than mathematical expectations"—had awoken, sending the share of investment in overall GDP growth up to 40 percent (from 25 percent in 2001), with the influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) making up a staggering 16 percent of GDP growth.[35] The real estate sector was on the forefront of this trend, accounting for 26 percent of FDI in 2007,[36] with economists even describing the possibility of "mak[ing] India a property-driven stock market."[37] In the wake of DLF launching the largest initial public offering (IPO) in the history of India in 2007, the company's chairman said in a speech to shareholders:

> I would go so far as to say that the institutional investment from overseas has been of such high quality that it is clear that global investors, knowing fully well that the growth of India is closely linked to real estate and infrastructure development in the country, have chosen your Company to express their faith in the future of the Indian economy . . . [and this] reflects investor confidence in the DLF growth story.[38]

According to Jones Lang LaSalle, one of the world's largest real estate firms, India became the cutting edge in global real estate investment: "Total retail mall stock has been doubling every year, from a meagre one million sq ft in 2002 to a staggering 40 million sq ft in 2007 and an estimated 60 million sq ft by the end of 2008," and "office rental rates went up almost 73 percent from 07–8, and capital values went up 72.4 percent."[39] The chairman of Jones Lang LaSalle's Indian subsidiary said: "On an average, we've been growing over the last three years by 60 percent to 70 percent. . . . Even as of today, there is [a] 20 million dwelling units shortfall on the residential, so the pent-up demand is huge. That needs to be caught up."[40] Where did this estimation of pent-up demand come from? What fueled these animal spirits?[41] Again, the estimation was based on anticipated future demand, "an ever burgeoning middle class," and what were called "favourable demographics," described as an "emerging youthful, urban and relatively affluent Vanguard Class that is the driving force behind consumer spending . . . This group includes circa 120 million people and continues to expand."[42]

STATISTICAL CONJURING, MYTHIC TREND LINES

In the above quotation, DLF noted investor confidence in what it calls its "growth story," while I have been using the word "conjure" to describe the fabulous reinvention of the poor as a future elite. To conjure: "To invoke by supernatural power, to effect by magic or jugglery"; "to bring, get, move, convey, as by magic."[43] What is the conjurer's trick in these speculative stories? The premise of the NCAER and McKinsey reports is a downward sloping poverty curve, for it is the transformation of the poor into the rich that pads the promise of a sustained profit margin and ever-rising land prices. India's official poverty estimates, published by the Planning Commission, also read a gradual increase in income levels across India, with the percentage of Indians living below the official poverty line falling from 44.7 percent in 1985 to 36.2 percent in 1995, and all the way down to 27.5 percent by 2005.[44] But, as the economist Utsa Patnaik argues, this is an act of "statistical trickery": "No amount of full-page advertisements by the government in newspapers . . . can alter the fact that in reality . . . this country remains a Republic of Hunger."[45]

Patnaik has been arguing in recent years that the Planning Commission, the central government body that establishes the official poverty line for the country, has abandoned its own standards of poverty estimation to conceal what is in fact an increase in the incidence of poverty throughout India during the economic reform years. To understand the basis of her claim, we must briefly foray into the methods of poverty estimation in India, for it is only with a basic understanding of nutritional norms that we can begin to see the trick by which India's hundreds of millions of poor people are read as an opportunity for investment.

Since the early 1970s, poverty estimates in India have been based on establishing a poverty line defined as the monthly expenditure per person required to ensure the daily per capita consumption of 2,100 calories of food in urban areas and 2,400 calories in rural areas. Those spending below the poverty line are considered poor because they do not consume enough calories. While this is obviously a minimalist definition of poverty, including no norms for nonfood expenditure (e.g., shelter, clothing, education), it is the standard the government of India has used to define poverty for forty years, and in this line—in its trajectory (up or down) and in who lives below and above it (more people or less)—lies the image of future India. Every five years or so, the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) surveys hundreds of thousands of households across India, measuring total household expenditure and total food consumption, with smaller-scale surveys conducted annually. These surveys are summarized in tables that present a population distribution according to per capita monthly expenditure groups in one column alongside the daily per capita calories of food consumed by each of those groups in another. Such data are compiled for India's major cities and at the state and national level. Poverty levels can be directly observed on the NSSO's tables because they show the percentage of households whose monthly per capita consumption expenditure is not enough to meet minimum caloric norms: anyone spending at or below the expenditure level necessary to eat enough food is counted as poor.

In 1974, the Planning Commission used this very approach—called the method of "direct observation"—to establish rural and urban poverty lines of 49 and 57 rupees per person per month, respectively. This established the incidence of poverty, which was 56 percent across India. The National Sample Survey (NSS) has been completed annually since 1974. However, rather than following this method, the Planning Commission simply applies a consumer price index adjustment to the 1974 poverty line, assuming that the pattern of consumer expenditure has remained unchanged with time. This method of "indirect estimation," as Patnaik calls it, leads to widely divergent poverty numbers from those derived from the method of direct observation. This is because it fails to consider changes in consumption patterns caused by such things as a decline in common property resources and payment in kind, both of which supplement household consumption.[46] The shift away from measuring poverty based on food intake in favor of a simple price adjustment has resulted in a delinking of official poverty estimates from the Planning Commission's own nutrition norm. Official poverty trends, as a result, now reflect only the changing price of food, not households' ability to access it.

Patnaik, using the direct observation method drawn from the NSS, finds that the Planning Commission's 2005 poverty line provided enough money to consume only 1,820 and 1,835 calories per person per day in rural and urban areas, respectively—far below the 2,400 and 2,100 norms. That is, she argues that in India, there is a large and growing percentage of the population that is malnourished and *not* considered poor.[47]

After acquiring the NSS data from 1983 to 2005, I calculated the poverty rate using the direct observation method (described in Patnaik (2007, 2008)), which I then compared with the official Planning Commission estimates. I did my own calculation instead of reproducing Patnaik's data because she provides poverty estimates only for the large-sample years (1994, 2000, 2005), whereas I wanted to present annual results on the same terms as McKinsey (whose data end at 2005). My results, which I present in greater detail when I return to McKinsey's figures below, closely resemble Patnaik's findings. Like Patnaik, my numbers show that poverty in India, according to official nutritional norms, has been steadily increasing over the past twenty years. Whereas official estimates show that poverty numbers have fallen from more than 40 percent in the early 1980s to 27.5 percent by 2005, direct observation shows that the percentage of Indians with too little food has jumped from just over 50 percent to 80 percent over the same period. It is not hard to locate the source of this huge gulf in findings: for 2005, the official poverty line, as reported by the Planning Commission, was 356 rupees per person per month (~$8.2 at 2005 exchange rates) for rural areas and 539 rupees (~$12.5) for urban areas, whereas meeting minimum nutritional norms, according to my calculation using the NSS tables, actually required 890 rupees (~$20.5) for rural areas and 930 rupees (~$21.5) for urban areas.[48] This means that to be officially considered poor one had to consume less than 12 rupees (1/30th of the monthly 356 rupee poverty line, equivalent to about 27 US cents) a day in rural India, and less than 18 rupees (~42 US cents) a day in urban India.[49] Based on my calculation, the Planning Commission's estimate rendered invisible more than a half billion people who did not eat enough food every day.[50]

The political implications of the Planning Commission's statistical trickery are massive, including their use in justifying a reduction in food subsidies to the poor in the face of documented increases in malnutrition. But I offer these figures not to claim that my numbers are the truest. In 2007, a government report estimated India's poverty rate at 77 percent, while a second government committee, in 2009, using different poverty measures, came up with 38 percent.[51] This huge range in estimates, each effecting a different picture of poverty, confirms that what we might think of as long *chains of assumptions* are a part of all poverty measures.[52] So, rather than weigh in on poverty "truth,"[53] my aim is to examine the representational work that poverty trendlines perform, as well as the narrative afterlives of these graphic artifacts once they take on their own form and signification.[54] What happens after the complex political translation of material deprivation into a line on a page? What happens once, as Robert Chambers wrote more than twenty years ago, "poverty becomes what has been measured," once the chain of assumptions and value judgments translating "reality out there" into a line on a page recede?[55]

POVERTY MYTH

John Harriss writes of the social science of poverty measurement: "Narratives, some of them almost myths, drive the collection and interpretation of data."[56] Myth, according to Roland Barthes, is a type of depoliticized speech that produces statements that go without saying. It does so by giving them a "natural and eternal justification . . . a clarity

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which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact."[57] In this light, consider the Planning Commission's *India Vision 2020* report:

> The compounded effect of achieving the targeted annual GDP growth rate of 8.5 to 9 per cent over the next 20 years would result in a quadrupling of the real per capita income and *almost eliminating the percentage of Indians living below the poverty line*. This will raise India's rank from around 11th today to 4th from the top in 2020 among 207 countries given in the World Development Report in terms of GDP. Further, in terms of per capita GDP measured in ppp [purchasing power parity] India's rank will rise by a minimum of 53 ranks from the present 153 to 100. This will mean India will move from a low income country to an upper middle income country. This is a very real possibility for us to seize upon and realise.[58]

This passage reads rising per capita GDP as a sign of poverty reduction, presenting the link between declining poverty and economic growth as a statement of fact requiring no explanation. While the report briefly acknowledges that "in spite of enormous progress in food production, nearly half the country's population still suffers from chronic undernutrition and malnutrition," it proceeds to divorce hunger from the concept of poverty in presenting a glorious Indian future in which poverty is no longer an economic problem.[59] Hunger in the present is anachronistic, the present is fixed as an already anticipated future without poverty, and the poor do not need to be, and in fact cannot be, read as poor. This is the myth of economic growth.

To Barthes, myth is a metalanguage that speaks about an already established language-object, or a sign. A sign is made up of a linguistic chain linking signifier to signified, form (a word, photograph, chart, etc.) to content (the concept with which the form is associated). In the case of poverty numbers, we might consider this sign to be the chain of assumptions linking various formal measures of deprivation (nutritional status, the frequency of meals eaten, etc.) to the concept of poverty. In other words, nutritional and expenditure data are the signifier and the statement "the number of people spending less than 539 rupees a month has decreased" is the signified.[60] Together, these two elements make up a linguistic sign ("poverty has decreased"), the raw material upon which mythical speech operates.[61] Myth then takes hold of that initial sign (the signifier-signified link: nutritional data-"poverty" in this case) and treats it as itself a signifier pointing to a new concept—what Barthes calls a mythical concept.

In the case of poverty numbers, the original signified "more people spend 539 rupees a month"—a statement with a stable reference to field measures—is transformed into the new meaning "the poor are becoming rich." This is where the mythical concept of economic growth appears.

A decrease in official poverty numbers, even if that decrease ignores rising hunger, signifies that economic growth solves poverty, and the picture of more people spending at least 539 rupees per month, confirms what we already know: poverty will disappear. Here again is a report by the Planning Commission, which extrapolates the fall in the official poverty rate (1.08 percent decline per annum) forward to claim: "*Poverty in India would be eliminated by 2020*, when India would be a Middle Income Country."[62] As in the above block quotation from the Planning Commission, this statement does not refer to the content of poverty (i.e., expenditure and nutritional data), making clear that "poverty," as a sign of economic conditions in India, is shorn of reference to its origins.[63] This can be visualized in Figure 1.2 as the distance between "2 Signified" and "II SIGNIFIED," which is the gap between the meaning established through the linguistic system and the mythical concept that picks up and works upon this meaning. In the mythological system, meaning derived from the linguistic system is reduced to form as it becomes the first term of the mythic sign. Meaning has value because it is the product of an initial linguistic reading: in our case, expenditure data allow us to understand that people are spending more money. When it is reduced to form, such as a line on a graph, however, that meaning loses its value and only "the letter remains."[64] Or, in our case, only the line remains, and the knowledge that rising expenditure does not necessarily mean decreasing poverty loses its value.

McKinsey's report on future consumer demand works through the same mythical concept of economic growth, constructing, this time through more visual form, the category of the deprived as a holdover from an earlier era—a remnant of an inefficient, planned economy. To visualize the mythic nature of McKinsey's celebration of India's middle-class future, I plotted the percentage of Indians who do not meet minimum nutritional norms (based on the direct observation method outlined by Patnaik 2008) on top of the McKinsey chart depicting India's escape from poverty, as shown in Figure 1.3.[65] As the figure shows, the percentage of what I have labeled the "absolute poor," which represents the undernourished, in India makes clear the image work that goes into the myth of middle-class India.

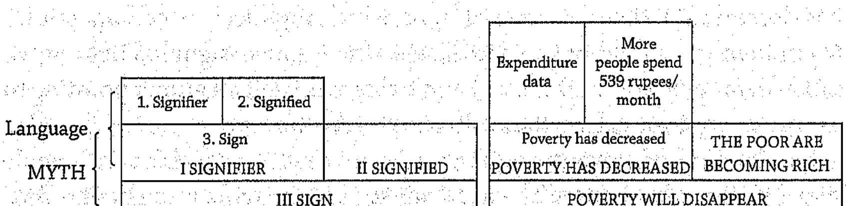
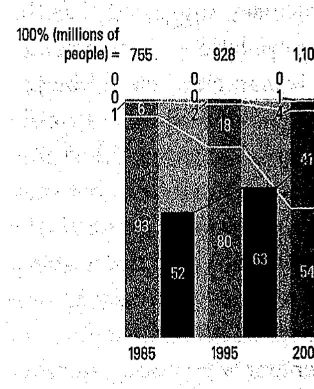


Figure 1.2. Mythic signification, as represented abstractly by Barthes (1972) on left and as is specific to Indian poverty discourse on right.



¹Annual income: globals = >1,000,000 rupees; st
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Figure 1.3. Deconstructing growth.
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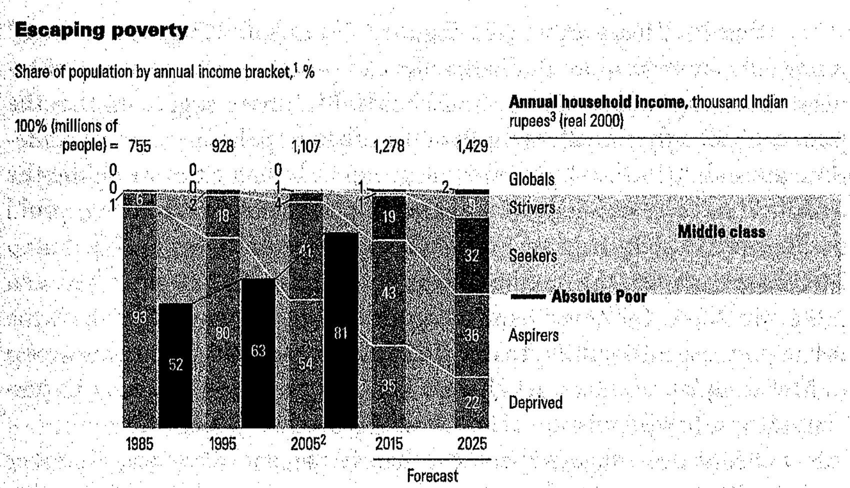

[1]Annual income: globals = >1,000,000 rupees; strivers = 500,000–1,000,000; seekers = 200,000–499,999; aspirers = 90,000–199,999; deprived = <90,000; figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.
[2]Estimated.
[3]45.7 rupees = $1 in real 2000 dollars or 8.5 rupees = $1 adjusted for purchasing power parity.
Source: McKinsey Global Institute analysis

Figure 1.3. Deconstructing growth. Estimation of the percentage of absolute poor in India overlaid upon McKinsey's mythic presentation of a future without poverty.

The absolute poor, a category based on the largest survey of households across India (the NSS), shows that the era of economic reforms has, in contrast to McKinsey's claims, led to a massive increase in poverty. The rise in farmer suicides, the burgeoning population of urban slum dwellers, the decline in per capita food grain absorption, and the persistence of high rates of stunted growth in children in India throughout the 2000s all confirm this startling trend, yet the measure of malnourishment or the observation of real purchasing power do not figure in the magical incantations of middle-class growth found in McKinsey's table, for this is an image less concerned with referencing an existing reality than producing its own reality.[66]

In McKinsey's report, the actual numbers backing its figures—the chain of assumptions that produced the picture of rising incomes—are not presented. This makes it clear that the figures, as graphic artifacts, lack a stable relationship between discourse and things in the world; they point not to the numbers that ostensibly produced them, but rather to a different meaning: growth will eliminate poverty. This move from an internally referenced linguistic function—premised on a claim of representational adequacy—to an unreferenced yet naturalized meaning is what Barthes means by mythical speech. McKinsey's figure hence works more like a picture than what we typically think of as charts or figures. As Barthes says: "Everything happens as if the picture *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier [of myth] *gave a foundation* to the signified."[67]

Another McKinsey chart (see Figure 1.4), called "Winds of Change," represents an even more dramatic effort to paint poverty as an anachronism. Focusing only on urban households, McKinsey suggested that the poor were already a small minority of the urban population and that sometime around 2013 the largest income group in Indian cities would be the middle class (the seekers), when barely 6 percent of city dwellers would be deprived. Using the direct observation method, I have included atop McKinsey's graphic the number of absolute poor in Indian cities between 1985 and 2005. The trend here yet again reveals the means by which the urban poor are misidentified as an already emergent middle-income group in McKinsey's presentation. Whereas McKinsey claimed that only 13 percent of the urban population of India was deprived as of 2005, the method of direct observation suggests that more than 40 percent were poor, a number that steadily increased over the previous twenty years. Yet in India's aspiring world-class cities, the suggestion that the middle class is *not* the most rapidly growing class would strike almost anyone as absurd: the media had already declared the English-speaking, air-conditioned car-driver the harbinger of "India rising," and the urban form in these cities was already being constructed as a playground for consumption and tourism. Slums, the traditional settlement of the urban poor, are hence anachronistic, a housing type obsolete in light of the emerging middle-class future.

While the central government claims that India "needs to reach an economic growth rate of at least 8 percent in order to significantly reduce the incidence of poverty,"[68] McKinsey's graphics and the rhetorical strategy of narrating an impending middle-class future show that the symbolic and physical displacement of the poor—through the denial of their very

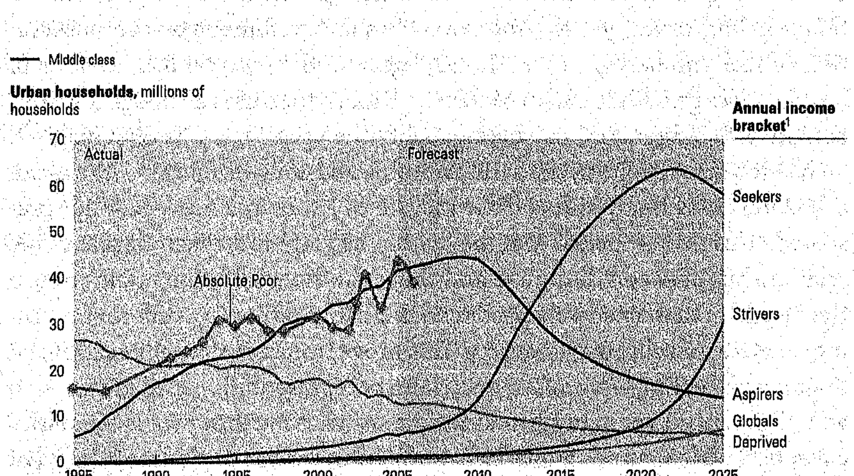

Figure 1.4. Calculation of number of "absolute poor" urban households in India plotted on top of McKinsey's (2007) exhibit from "Tracking the Growth of India's Middle Class." Reprinted by permission.

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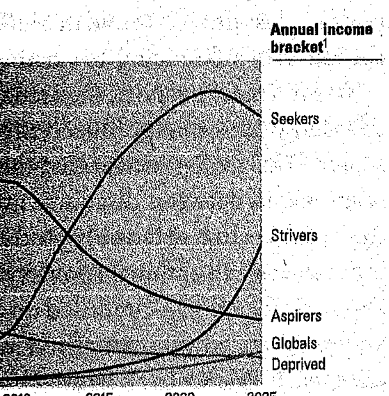

r" urban households in India plotted on top
rowth of India's Middle Class." Reprinted by

existence and through the large-scale displacement of urban squatters to attract capital investment into supposedly underutilized and vacant land—might better be read as a condition necessary to attain these rates of economic growth in the first place. In other words, these figures, by conjuring away the poor, perform economic growth.[69] The question of removing the poor would be one thing—a form of what Michael Watts calls "silent violence" driven by the goal of maximizing economic growth, regardless of the human cost.[70] But the narrative of world-class India, and especially of its world-class cities, is premised on an even more insidious equation: the poor not as obstacle, but asset; not the disappeared poor, but the consuming and entrepreneurial poor transforming themselves through the magic of economic growth. An article in *Newsweek* that appeared in February 2009, for example, during the height of the global financial meltdown, praised India's potential to lead a global recovery on the backs of the consuming poor:

> India boasts an unlikely growth driver all its own: legions of poor whose incomes have risen just enough in recent years to create powerful demands for basic goods and services. . . . The idea that Indian backwardness is a plus may sound absurd . . . [But, s]uch a large population subsisting at so low an economic base is a powerful economic driver.[71]

This vision, common in real estate prospectuses and market projections, "manages to transform even the absence of development into a sign of possible growth."[72]

In the introduction, I argued that government in Delhi works despite the absence of a comprehensive statistical picture of territory and population. I have here shown how numbers deployed for governmental ends—figures meant to educate desires and configure habits and beliefs—require no equivalence between the record and the world. They rather operate more as aesthetic objects—as pictures aimed at *performing* a different reality, not reflecting or corresponding to it. Poverty figures, I have shown, are meant to shape investor confidence, to maintain the influx of billions of dollars of foreign direct investment, to sustain the speculative rise in land prices, and to construct economic reform and land market liberalization as part of a nation-building project in the interest of the population as a whole. And, in millennial Delhi, state officials have joined this performance, ignoring material deprivation in the country, accepting McKinsey's numbers, and speaking through these images to describe the gated communities and private penthouses cropping up as housing stock to meet the demand of India's emerging consumer class. That is, the exclusive homes being built with the massive influx of investment money are not just for the wealthiest 5 percent of the population, it is claimed, but rather for the future everyday Delhiite. The growing number of people living in slums with insecure tenure and unable to afford housing elsewhere do not fit into this picture. They are anachronistic, the poor yet to disappear.

CONJURED FUTURES

This book is about the aesthetic politics of a world-class future, the way in which such a future is conjured into existence, deployed and circulated through diverse political technologies, received and practiced as a normative framework for self-government, and lived and contested in everyday life. In Scene 3 from the introduction, Gopal described his faith in the integrity of an imagined map, a faith that his potential displacement was part of a broader project of urban improvement—that his eviction would somehow make the city a better place and maybe, just maybe, a better place *for him*. Investor confidence in India's growth story, too, is based on a faith, a faith that land values will steadily climb along with the rise of India's consumer class. Each of these faiths is sustained by what I am calling aesthetic rule, a means of eliciting, fostering, and promoting a particular set of convictions and dispositions in a population through a compelling image. While the conjuring of India's "great middle class" constitutes a quite distinct set of practices of calculative expertise, it thus shares with the three scenes with which I began this book a powerful form of image work: a discursive and material mobilization of an image of the future intent on transforming the desires and dispositions, habits and habitus, affects and aversions of its consumer.

Poverty curves, I have shown, function as indicators of future economic strength. Yet while all instruments of economic prediction indicate what may come, the mythic projections offered by McKinsey elide the uncertainty of the indicated future. By "elide," I do not mean "lie." Rather, the particular picture of poverty on offer arises only through the contingent chain of assumptions that generated it. Different assumptions, as discussed above, would produce different pictures. Yet McKinsey's presentation asks us to query not this relationship, but the implications for present action of the picture supplied. This is what I meant in the introduction when I said that the world-class city is offered as an already known conclusion; it is cast in a prophetic temporality. The picture of the future is, more or less, fully supplied. What matters is not debating how present action will shape the emergent future, but rather how present action can be aligned to prepare for what is to come.[73]

The numerical conjuring of the middle class encourages the anticipation of a prosperous future and draws in an audience to evaluate existing conditions on the basis of that future. Discourses of Delhi's imminent

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transformation into a world-class city likewise put in place the vision of an attainable and inherently good future, allowing diverse viewers to evaluate existing uses of space on the basis of this future matrix. Like the industrial steel towns built as idealizations of the nation under India's earlier developmentalist dispensation, world-class city making and its diverse representational vehicles "visibly showcase the promise of the as-yet-unrealized future."[74] Yet while this earlier, Nehruvian city-making project elevated the worker-citizen as the ideal national subject—a subject valorized for his role in state-directed economic production, in the world-class city—the worker of yesteryear is recast as a consumer whose assent to citizenship is gauged by his contribution to ever-rising property prices.

In the National Capital Region, which includes Delhi and its surrounding satellite cities, the average price of a new flat today is more than a hundred times the mean annual income of Delhiites. Fifty-four percent of Delhi is poor,[75] yet the bulk of new housing is built for the superrich. If in Delhi, as in the rest of India, the middle class remains but a small minority, then who is buying the thousands of new penthouses being constructed every year? Real estate insiders concede that approximately 70 percent of buyers in the National Capital Region are investors, who typically purchase the properties before a single brick is laid, with only digital renderings, scale models, and vacant plots of land to assure them that their castles in the air will one day materialize.[76] These investors, in many instances the property developers themselves, purchase with the intention of flipping their properties—a practice typically repeated many times before construction is finished—as soon as prices climb enough, often packaging sets of flats together to be sold to larger institutional investors.[77] Only very late in the game, if ever, does the question of who might actually live in such flats enter the equation. With one in five completed houses lying vacant in the booming areas of the Delhi National Capital Region in 2010, real estate agents noted that "vacant stock simply shows profiteering at play in an era of exorbitant property prices" wherein builders and investors do not mind foregoing rental income—and avoiding actual end users—because of anticipated increases in property prices.[78] This is millennial Delhi, a city that had a housing shortfall of 1.3 million units in 2007, but over nine hundred thousand vacant houses.[79]

This is speculative urbanism, where the promise of a world-class future sustains the material transformation of the present, even when the roots of the future projection are forgotten. Empty income projections produce empty apartment buildings; invisibilized poverty trends make the replacement of slums and low-income land uses by properties few can afford appear inclusive. As William Cronon observes of speculative boosters during Chicago's rise, "fictive lots on fictive streets in fictive towns became the basis for thousands of transactions whose only justification was a dubious idea expressed on an overly optimistic map."[80] As in nineteenth-century Chicago, so in twenty-first-century Delhi; frontier growth begins with the image of a future city, which, when projected onto the present, creates a vision of economic possibility. Despite uncertainty as to whether the urban future pictured in the overly optimistic map or speculative poverty projection will ever materialize, these graphic artifacts guide action and thought, constituting a field for action. As we will see in the following chapters, the world-class aesthetic similarly operates as a projection across existing space, allowing viewers to assess the merits of existing land uses on the basis of expected future appearances.

Even in the wake of the global economic meltdown that began in 2008, real estate investors remained hot on India—for as long as the future Indian middle class could be conjured into economic prospectuses and shareholder reports, the upswing in the income curve (and the downswing in the poverty line) was able to secure investment. As one annual report for a real estate fund read in late 2009: "The current velocity of growth in the world's emerging markets should provide significant opportunities in Brazil, China, India, Indonesia and other countries, where 6 percent to 8 percent plus GDP growth should enable middle-class expansion and underpin demand for real estate."[81]

This chapter has also shown that in the face of its quantitative insignificance, the middle class has been accorded great symbolic power. The middle class is, we have seen, the world-class city's talisman, inhering the power to propel Indian cities onto the global stage and to maintain the torrid rise in urban property prices. While it should now be clear that the price of property is the engine of world-class city making, Marx has shown us that this rent is also the expression of the social power of landed property.[82] It should come as no surprise, then, that rising ground rents and the rising symbolic significance of the property-owning middle class comes with an equal rise in the political power of landed property. It is to the conditions through which the power of property grew in millennial Delhi that I now turn.

Gent

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