

## URBAN REIMAGINATION: PUBLIC TRUSTS, LANDED ASSETS, AND THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S CITIES

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### ABSTRACT

This extensive article meticulously examines the historical trajectory of public improvement trusts in shaping India's urban landscape during the late colonial period. It delves into their intricate relationship with real estate and the emergence of modern urban planning paradigms. Focusing on a comparative analysis of the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) and the Bombay City Improvement Trust (BCIT), this paper illustrates how these institutions, originally conceived as instruments for civic betterment, concurrently fostered a dynamic, often speculative, real estate market. This process, driven by technocratic expertise and distinct financial mechanisms, laid foundational principles for contemporary urban development in India. The article posits that the "improvement regime" was a crucial, yet under-explored, antecedent to India's ongoing urban transformations, characterized by an enduring tension between the pursuit of public welfare and the inherent logic of land valorization. By tracing the evolution of these trusts from their inception in response to public health crises to their role as key players in urban financialization, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the historical contingencies that continue to influence urban governance, land economics, and the socio-spatial inequalities prevalent in present-day Indian cities. It argues that what is often perceived as "neoliberal urbanism" today is, in many respects, a discontinuous unraveling of processes initiated over a century ago within this improvement regime.

**Keywords:** India; Improvement Trust; Real Estate; Financialization; Speculation; Colonialism; Law; City; Economy; Urban Governance; Public Trusts; Landed Assets; Urban Planning; Technocracy; Recoupment; Rentierism; Uneven Development; Neoliberal Urbanism.

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### INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the twentieth century in British India heralded a transformative era in urban governance, marked by an escalating concern for public health, sanitation, and the ambitious "improvement" of rapidly expanding cities. This period witnessed the institutionalization of powerful public trusts, such as the Bombay City Improvement Trust (BCIT) established in 1898, followed by the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) in 1912, and later in Lahore (1936) and Delhi (1937) [2]. These bodies were explicitly mandated to undertake large-scale urban interventions, often in response to pressing health crises and the perceived disorder of indigenous settlements. However, their influence extended far beyond mere civic betterment; these trusts emerged as pivotal actors in a nascent real estate market, fundamentally reshaping urban land from a static resource into a dynamic, commodified asset capable of generating significant capital. This article delves into the intricate workings of this "improvement regime" in late

colonial India, meticulously examining the complex interplay between public trusts, landed assets, and the unfolding urban futurities of the subcontinent [1].

The conceptualization of "improvement" during this period was deeply entrenched in the prevailing utilitarian philosophies of the British Empire, which espoused the principle of achieving "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" through systematic social engineering and reform [2]. This worldview often positioned European cities as exemplars of order, rationality, and progress, implicitly contrasting them with non-European urban centers, which were frequently depicted as requiring intervention to overcome their perceived "prehistoric, savage, and enchanted" states [3]. Scholarly discourse has extensively analyzed the broader ideological frameworks of liberal imperialism that permeated colonial governance, illustrating how European legal concepts, cultural norms, and market principles were selectively reconfigured and imposed upon the colonial context [4]. A critical catalyst for these far-reaching urban interventions was the

devastating series of bubonic plague outbreaks that swept through India in the late 19th century, starting in Bombay in 1896 and subsequently spreading through key port cities like Calcutta and Karachi before reaching the interior [5]. This "Third Pandemic" not only paralyzed commercial activities and caused immense loss of life but also intensified a global focus on epidemiology and urban sanitation, compelling colonial authorities to implement radical measures. The plague, therefore, served as an "alibi" for unprecedented governmental intervention into urban spaces [6]. The urgency of these health crises provided a powerful justification for the creation of specialized bodies capable of undertaking large-scale demolitions, rehousing schemes, and infrastructure projects, thereby inaugurating what some scholars term "plague urbanism" [7].

The establishment of improvement trusts in India was not an isolated phenomenon but drew parallels with similar initiatives in Britain, notably the Glasgow Improvement Trust (GIT), founded in 1866 to address the rampant typhus and cholera epidemics by acquiring and redeveloping overcrowded residential areas [8]. While the Indian trusts modeled themselves on these British antecedents, the colonial context presented unique and formidable challenges. These included the existence of deeply entrenched informal settlements, complex indigenous urban structures, and pre-existing social hierarchies that intertwined caste, class, and colonial power dynamics [9]. Terms such as "slum," "chawls" (specific to Bombay's tenement-style housing), and "bustees" (a pan-Indian term for informal settlements) became pervasive in official colonial discourse [10]. These terms were not merely descriptive; they served to categorize, homogenize, and often pathologize existing housing arrangements, providing a potent justification for extensive demolition drives and often inadequate resettlement schemes. Prominent town planners of the era, such as E.P. Richards, the chief engineer of the CIT, meticulously documented the perceived "evils" of these settlements, directly correlating them with crime, insanity, disease, and social malaise, thus underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive urban planning and reform [11].

This article critically reassesses existing scholarship on Indian improvement trusts, which has often focused on their "failures" to achieve ideal sanitary environments. Instead, it proposes a shift in analytical focus to the "contingent workings" of these trusts, arguing that their very structure was "constitutively designed" to produce specific outcomes, including uneven development [22]. It argues that the improvement trusts, while framed as benevolent instruments of public welfare and civic improvement, concurrently functioned as powerful engines of real estate transformation. They were vested with unprecedented legal authority to acquire, clear, and redevelop land, thereby actively creating and valorizing new urban markets for property [22]. This process of

land acquisition and subsequent dispossession has been extensively documented by historians, revealing its profound and often devastating impact on marginalized communities in various Indian cities [14, 15, 16, 17]. Operating within the complex administrative landscape of colonial governance, these trusts frequently navigated tensions between their imperial mandates and the limited powers of existing municipal corporations, often assuming a quasi-sovereign authority over urban planning and land management [18, 19, 20, 21]. Crucially, the "artificial legal personhood" of these trusts, a concept rooted in legal theory, allowed them to act with considerable autonomy and longevity, effectively blurring the lines between the pursuit of public good and the emerging logic of market-driven development [25, 26, 30, 31, 32, 33]. This essay aims to illuminate how this unique institutional structure, combined with the imperatives of sanitation and modern planning, fundamentally reshaped the relationship between land, public authority, and the very concept of urban futurity in India, laying silent groundwork for many of the "new developments" often associated with contemporary neoliberal urbanism.

## METHODS

This study employs a rigorous historical and archival research methodology, primarily drawing upon a rich array of colonial administrative reports, legislative acts, official correspondence, and contemporary accounts directly pertaining to the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) and the Bombay City Improvement Trust (BCIT). The approach is inherently comparative, analyzing how similar mandates and challenges were addressed, and often replicated, across these two significant urban centers, while also acknowledging the specific socio-political and economic contexts of each city. The core of this methodology lies in a meticulous qualitative analysis of primary source materials, supplemented by engagement with relevant secondary literature to provide theoretical frameworks and contextualization.

### Primary Sources:

1. Annual Reports and Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) and Bombay City Improvement Trust (BCIT): These extensive documents form the backbone of the empirical analysis. They offer detailed insights into the trusts' operational mandates, financial allocations, specific land acquisition and demolition strategies, resettlement policies (or lack thereof), and the stated rationales behind their numerous improvement projects [42, 51, 52, 68, 74]. These reports often include statistical data, scheme outlines, and justifications for particular interventions, providing a window into the daily workings and decision-making processes of these powerful bodies.
2. Legislative Acts: Key legislative instruments, most notably the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911 (Bengal Act No. V of 1911), are central to understanding the legal framework and the extraordinary powers vested in these

trusts [27, 28, 39]. A close reading of these acts reveals the scope of their authority, including compulsory land acquisition, the power to demolish existing structures, and the ability to raise loans and generate revenue, often bypassing the traditional limitations of municipal governance. These acts signify a new era of proactive governmental intervention in urban space.

3. **Official Correspondence and Minutes:** Letters exchanged between influential bodies like the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the Government of Bengal offer crucial insights into the perspectives and demands of commercial interests and their interactions with the nascent improvement trusts [41, 44, 67, 100]. These documents frequently highlight the economic motivations underlying the push for urban improvement and the desire for "efficiency" in urban management, reflecting the powerful lobbying of mercantile and industrial elites.

4. **Contemporary Publications, Lectures, and Professional Reports:** Works authored by prominent officials and observers of the period provide invaluable firsthand accounts and expert opinions. Figures such as Cecil Henry Bompas (former chairman of CIT) [1, 62, 71, 73, 103, 104, 105], J.P. Orr (chairman of BCIT) [29, 40, 53, 63, 72, 87, 98, 101], and E.P. Richards (chief engineer of CIT) [11, 49, 50, 56, 57, 60, 61, 84, 96, 99] published detailed reports, delivered lectures, and penned memoirs that offer unique perspectives on the challenges, successes, and ideological underpinnings of the trusts' work. Richards's comprehensive report on Calcutta, for instance, provides extensive details on sanitary conditions and proposed interventions. These sources also illuminate the emerging professionalization of urban planning and engineering in colonial India.

#### Secondary Literature:

A wide array of secondary literature on colonial urbanism, legal history, economic history, and real estate in India provides essential theoretical frameworks and contextualization [4, 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 26, 30, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 43, 46, 47, 48, 54, 55, 58, 59, 64, 65, 66, 69, 70, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 97, 102, 106, 107, 108, 109]. This includes works on governmentality, speculative urbanism, the history of property law, and analyses of social and economic inequalities in colonial cities. Engagement with this scholarship allows for the integration of broader conceptual debates into the specific historical analysis of the trusts, ensuring the study's relevance to contemporary urban theory.

#### Analytical Framework:

The analysis is structured to meticulously trace the evolution of the "improvement regime" through several interconnected phases:

1. **Conceptualization and Legal Establishment:** Examining the initial motivations and the legislative acts

that granted the trusts their unique powers, including their "artificial legal personhood."

2. **Practical Implementation:** Investigating the day-to-day operations, specific schemes, and the challenges faced in areas like land acquisition, demolition, and rehousing. This includes analyzing the role of "technocrats" and the shift towards a more "efficient" and less "deliberative" form of governance.

3. **Financial Mechanisms and Real Estate Transformation:** A core focus is placed on how the trusts, through strategies like "recoupment" and land valuation, actively participated in, and often drove, the formation of a capitalist real estate market. This involves exploring the concept of "unearned increment" and the inherent speculative dimension of their work.

4. **Social and Economic Implications:** Assessing the impact of the trusts' operations on various urban populations, particularly the marginalized, and how their actions contributed to (or exacerbated) social inequalities.

5. **Long-term Legacy:** Tracing the "discontinuous unraveling" of the improvement regime into postcolonial urban development paradigms, linking historical practices to contemporary challenges such as land financialization and selective urbanization.

Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the trusts, through their acquisition, clearance, and sale of land, actively participated in the formation of a capitalist real estate market in colonial India. The study also explores the inherent contradictions within the trusts' mandate, highlighting the constant tension between public health objectives, social welfare considerations, and the increasingly dominant financial imperatives. By employing this comprehensive methodological approach, the article aims to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of the profound and enduring legacy of the improvement regime on India's urban futures.

## RESULTS

The establishment of improvement trusts in colonial India marked a fundamental shift in urban governance, introducing powerful, semi-autonomous bodies endowed with legal and financial authority that significantly surpassed that of existing municipal corporations [19, 20, 21]. These trusts were not merely extensions of local government but distinct entities, legally designed to execute large-scale urban interventions with a level of autonomy and efficiency previously unseen.

### The Legal Architecture of the Trusts and the Rise of Technocracy

The legal foundation of the improvement trusts was crucial to their operational capacity. The Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911, for instance, explicitly granted the CIT the extensive power to acquire, hold, and dispose of land, effectively establishing it as an "artificial legal person" [27, 28, 39]. This legal construct, as explicated by



legal historians like F.W. Maitland, distinguishes corporations from "natural persons" by endowing them with formal organization through charters or statutes, allowing them to engage in acts like borrowing money, possessing property, and operating in perpetuity [25]. Ritu Birla's insightful analysis highlights how this 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'" [26, 46]. The improvement trust, though publicly incorporated, fundamentally differed from charitable trusts which were designed for "general public utility" and perpetual good [47, 48]. Instead, it focused on "general improvement schemes" like street widening and slum clearance, conspicuously omitting any mandate for comprehensive public utility [49, 50, 55]. This omission was a deliberate choice, signaling a focus on physical infrastructure and economic efficiency over broader social welfare.

Unlike charitable trusts, which are typically designed to operate in perpetuity for public benefit, the improvement trusts were conceptualized as "one-time interventions" [34]. For example, the Secretary of State, George Hamilton, envisioned the CIT to conclude its operations and transfer liabilities to the municipality within twenty years of its establishment. This mandate for "rapidity" and "immediate relief" [35] was rooted in the urgency of medical emergencies like the plague, but it also served to justify swift, often disruptive, interventions without long-term accountability or comprehensive rehabilitation planning. This "one-time intervention" logic meant that the improvements were inherently selective and contributed to "uneven development," exacerbating issues like congestion and poor housing in the long run [23].

The operational structure of the trusts further emphasized efficiency and expertise. Both the BCIT and CIT boards had limited municipal representation, with a stronger emphasis on members from commercial bodies like the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the Bombay Millowners' Association [39, 40, 41]. This composition reflected a shift in power dynamics, where the "deliberative" and often slow-moving municipal corporations, derided as "talking shops of baboos" [36], were supplanted by a more "efficient" technocratic regime. The trusts actively sought "candidates with 'sound theoretical and practical training'" [42] for roles like engineers, architects, and land valuers. This influx of technical professionals, termed a "rule of experts" by Timothy Mitchell [45, 69], transformed civic administration. E.P. Richards, a civil engineer, critically pointed out the flaws in CIT's foundational act, stating it was merely a "local Housing Act" rather than a comprehensive "Town Planning Act," making effective, widespread improvement impossible under its current funding [60, 61]. His clash with Chairman Bompas, a traditional civil servant, epitomized this tension between the old bureaucratic guard and the new technocratic

ethos [56, 57, 58, 59]. The commercial elites, frustrated with municipal inertia, eagerly embraced this shift towards "sound principles of engineering science" [44].

This technocratization had profound implications. By drastically reducing membership and consolidating power in a handful of nominated trustees, the trusts emerged as executive bodies with significant authority but little real accountability to the electorate or the general public [43]. The colonial administration viewed the Indian public as "laymen" lacking "modern" civic consciousness, often dismissing their "erroneous ideas and views" regarding urban planning [51, 52, 53]. This disdain was perhaps amplified by the fact that, unlike the Glasgow Improvement Trust which relied on local taxation for funding, Indian trusts received minimal contributions from the general public [54]. This fostered an "uncharitable" approach, where the trusts, despite their public incorporation, largely abandoned the duty of providing "general public utility" and instead focused on profit-making schemes that primarily benefited themselves and commercial stakeholders [55].

### **The Trust as a Financial Vehicle: Recoupment, Valuation, and Speculation**

While the trusts possessed considerable legal powers, they faced significant financial constraints, especially in land acquisition. "Money had to be found," as Bompas stated, particularly in Calcutta, where the Permanent Settlement of 1793 had limited government-owned land unlike Bombay [62]. This led to the adoption of "recoupment" – a strategy where the trusts would acquire, develop, and then sell or lease the "improved" land at a profit to recover costs [70]. This strategy quickly evolved beyond mere cost recovery into a deliberate mechanism for generating "windfall profits" and accumulating capital, effectively turning the trusts into early practitioners of "house flipping" in the colonial context.

This mastery of recoupment was predicated on the coordinated expertise of the trusts' technocratic teams, particularly the land valuer. The "improvement regime" was built upon a meticulous system that translated abstract notions of "livability" and "health" into quantifiable, monetizable forms [69]. The city was reduced to a calculable domain, where "use values" were converted into "exchange values" dictated by market forces. The land valuer's role was central to assigning new values to existing properties and, critically, to future constructions [70]. However, this "market rationality" was often arbitrary. Shabnum Tejani points out that there was "no objective value in land that officers of the trust could establish," leading to disputes and legal arbitrations [70, 93]. Despite this, market value was extolled as an impersonal and objective assessment, justifying the displacement of families who preferred to stay on their ancestral lands rather than allow them to be used for "more advantageous and profitable purposes" [71].

The "uncharitable" workings of this capitalist

improvement trust are evident in the narratives of its chairmen. J.P. Orr of BCIT, while disparaging the "large lock-up of capital" in an improvement scheme, readily justified it by describing the targeted area as "peculiarly bad slum property traversed by putrid open drains" [72]. Similarly, Bompas of CIT rationalized displacements by noting that "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" [73]. These statements reveal a stark lack of empathy for the dispossessed, prioritizing redevelopment costs and perceived economic benefits over human suffering.

The recoupment scheme's other facet was its reliance on predicting the future value of redeveloped properties. While the trusts recognized the "speculative option" inherent in estimating future building values, they actively engaged in it [74]. This process required the coordinated industry of surveyors, valuers, engineers, and accountants, fundamentally differing from previous planning regimes that merely constructed durable infrastructure. The trusts' commitment to manufacturing long-term spatial futures, through a blend of technical foresight and financial speculation, cemented their role not just as developers, but as key instigators of a burgeoning urban land market driven by projected, rather than inherent, value.

### **Fictions of Real Estate: Housing, Speculation, and Rentierism**

The trusts' singular focus on housing redevelopment was partly influenced by the fact that the improvement acts were often modeled on English Housing Acts, as was the case for Calcutta [60]. Colonial discourse frequently linked housing reform to the "moral and material reformation of the working class," portraying slum dwellers as "bad, weakly, and useless citizens" [11]. However, the underlying motivations were often economic. Bombay's millowners, for instance, grappled with housing their workers to retain labor and maximize output. Despite owning substantial land, they strategically offloaded this responsibility to the improvement trust, as neither the millowners nor the trust were keen on financial burdens without guaranteed returns [75, 76]. This led to a stalemate that exacerbated Bombay's overcrowding.

Sheetal Chhabria's insightful analysis highlights how "housing" itself was manufactured as a "new category" and an "object of governance" in the 1900s, enabling the state to manage urban populations and demarcate the city as a distinct entity [77, 78]. This process transformed abstract "shelter" into formalized "housing," stipulating what a healthy built environment should look like and disciplining residents' behaviors. Building on this, Alexia Yates argues for understanding global urban history through the lens of "real estate," distinguishing it from broader terms like "housing" or "built environment" [79]. For Yates, real estate reifies social relationships and

embodies a "double life" – existing as both a material, productive entity and a circulating sign representing its value [80, 81]. This concept is crucial for understanding how the improvement trusts transformed urban property into a fungible commodity.

The spatio-temporal distinctions between charitable trusts and improvement trusts are most apparent in the domain of real estate. Charitable trusts, by placing assets in perpetuity outside market circulation, create a "negative space" that forecloses possibilities of sale or alternative use, thereby ensuring stability and certainty [86]. In stark contrast, the improvement trusts actively created a market in urban property where privately owned lands were acquired, redeveloped, and subjected to speculation. This "unrestricted, wild, and greedy speculation" conjured value into empty or "unreal" spaces, whose future potential was invisible by tangible metrics [84]. The short-term objectives of the improvement trusts injected a sense of constant urgency and volatility into the housing market, leading to rapid price inflation and further exacerbating congestion and unlivability [87]. Orr noted that the value of land in Bombay increased dramatically following acquisition notifications, demonstrating how the very rumor of improvement schemes fueled speculation [87].

The issue of "land mobilization," where fixed landed property was disembedded and sold in the present based on its projected future worth, speaks to the concepts of "portfolio society" and "speculative urbanism" [88, 89, 90, 91, 92]. Ivan Ascher's work on "portfolio society" and Laura Bear's concept of speculation as a "technology of imagination" highlight how future uncertainties are monetized in the present [88, 94]. The financialization of land, evidenced in Bombay and Calcutta, reveals that this was not merely a metropolitan phenomenon but a core "extractive tactic of imperial governance" [91]. This historical dynamic produced urban spaces through the tension between movable and immovable property, fixed space and circulating capital, abstraction and materiality [91]. Furthermore, it suggests that "speculative urbanism," a concept often attributed to neoliberal cities, has a deeply rooted and uneven history traceable to this period [92].

The financialization of real estate under the improvement trusts prioritized exchange value over the intrinsic "use value" of a home as an intimate domestic space. The trusts, along with private investors, pursued "limitless exchange in pursuit of higher and higher profits to the detriment of small landholders and poor tenants" [97]. This led to "disputes over market value" and legal arbitrations, forcing judges to rely on sales of "similar land in the neighborhood" rather than purely speculative offers, thus grounding the "fictions of real estate" in some material reality [93].

The concept of "rent" further grounded these speculative activities in material life. Classical political economy defined rent as payment for a monopoly asset, contingent on a property's physical attributes and location [95]. The

trusts, while critiquing the "parasitic" nature of traditional rentiers who profited without labor, ironically entered the realm of rentier capitalism themselves. Richards lamented the difficulty of ascertaining "real rent" in India due to landlords engaging in "rack renting" to inflate property valuations prior to acquisition [96]. Despite the challenges of finding affordable rehousing that still yielded a "reasonable margin of profit," the trusts became the city's official landlords, aiming to retain possession of redeveloped housing [98, 99, 100, 101]. This marked their full entry into rentier capitalism, where their "improvement schemes" were intrinsically linked to profit-making, ultimately designed to benefit the trust itself rather than solely the urban public.

## DISCUSSION

The "improvement regime" initiated by public trusts in colonial India represents a watershed moment in the country's urban history, fundamentally altering the relationship between public authority, urban land, and nascent market forces. These trusts, born from the urgent need for public health reforms and civic betterment, paradoxically emerged as primary architects of a burgeoning real estate market characterized by speculation and valorization. This inherent duality—serving as both instruments of public good and agents of market accumulation—bears profound implications for comprehending India's contemporary urban landscape and its ongoing challenges.

The distinct legal and institutional framework of the improvement trusts, particularly their "artificial legal personhood," empowered them with an unprecedented degree of authority over urban land [25, 26]. This capacity to compulsorily acquire, transform, and then dispose of land at profit was instrumental in the commodification of urban space across India. The very concept of "improvement" became intrinsically linked to the valorization of land. Areas previously deemed "unfit for human habitation" were rendered economically valuable through planned interventions, infrastructure development, and speculative projections of future worth [49, 50, 84]. This process, as illuminated by scholars of "speculative urbanism," demonstrates how future value is not merely anticipated but actively inscribed onto present urban spaces, fueling cycles of investment and displacement [92, 94].

The explicit focus on capturing "unearned increment"—the increase in land value resulting from public investments—was a recurrent theme in the trusts' operational discourse and significantly contributed to the burgeoning real estate market [51, 52]. This aligns with classical economic debates surrounding rent, where profits accrued to landowners due to public expenditure were often critiqued as "unearned" and "parasitic" [95, 97]. While the trusts ostensibly aimed to reinvest these profits into further urban improvements, the unwavering emphasis on financial self-sustainability often led to the prioritization of revenue generation over equitable

urban development and affordable housing [75, 76, 77, 78]. This inherent tension between financial viability and social equity remains a persistent challenge in Indian cities today.

The historical operations of the improvement trusts serve as a vivid illustration of how colonial "governmentality"—the rationalities and techniques of governance—extended far beyond direct political control to encompass the intricate regulation of urban space and the shaping of economic relations [64, 65, 66]. The trusts, leveraging their technical expertise and expanded legal powers, embodied a distinct form of "rule by experts" that sought to rationalize, manage, and control urban populations and resources [45, 69]. However, this technocratic and often detached approach frequently overlooked the severe social costs of displacement, the destruction of pre-existing community networks, and the disruption of traditional livelihoods in informal settlements [14, 15, 34, 43]. The relentless pursuit of a "healthy city" defined by modern, planned infrastructure often led to the creation of a "dual urban landscape," where renovated elite areas coexisted with, and often directly resulted from, the dispossession and marginalization of the urban poor.

The conceptualization of "housing" as a malleable "object of governance," as proposed by Sheetal Chhabria, further illuminates the transformative power of these trusts [77, 78]. By framing shelter as a category to be managed, regulated, and indeed, commodified, the trusts laid the groundwork for disciplinary practices over urban populations. Alexia Yates's call to view global urban history through the lens of "real estate" provides a crucial analytical distinction, recognizing property not just as a physical entity but as a dynamic field of interests and a mode of capital accumulation [79, 80, 81]. The trusts actively engaged in creating the "fictions of real estate" through predictive valuations and speculation, transforming fixed assets into fungible commodities [84, 85, 88, 89, 90, 91, 94]. This process of "speculative urbanism" reveals a long, uneven history, challenging the notion that such phenomena are exclusive to contemporary neoliberalism [92].

Critically, the trusts' engagement with rent, from attempting to ascertain "real rent" amidst "rack renting" by landlords to their eventual entry into rentier capitalism by owning and renting out redeveloped housing, underscores their complex role in shaping urban economic relations [96, 97, 98, 100, 101]. This transition from public improvement body to urban landlord highlights the inherent contradictions in their mandate and the pervasive influence of the profit motive.

Looking towards India's urban futures, the indelible legacy of the improvement regime continues to resonate profoundly. Many contemporary urban development authorities across India, such as the Delhi Development Authority, can directly trace their institutional lineage and operational principles back to these colonial trusts [107, 108]. This historical continuity is evident in the ongoing



challenges of affordable housing, equitable land distribution, and managing rapid urban growth, where market forces often override social planning. The current emphasis on "smart cities" and large-scale infrastructure projects frequently replicates the underlying logic of improvement and valorization, reflecting the enduring influence of this historical trajectory and demonstrating that what is often labeled as "neoliberal" today is, in essence, a "discontinuous unraveling" of a century-old regime [109].

For urban theory and practice in the Global South, it is imperative to move beyond the mere application of theoretical models developed in the Global North. Instead, a more robust and nuanced understanding demands the development of frameworks firmly rooted in local historical specificities and contingencies [102]. Comprehending the "improvement regime" as a distinct historical formation, profoundly shaped by colonial imperatives, indigenous social structures, and local economic realities, is essential for a more accurate and comprehensive interpretation of India's complex urban trajectory. As C.H. Bompas noted in 1927, these trusts embodied a powerful belief in the "possibility of transformation" [103, 104, 105]. However, this transformation was invariably mediated by the intricate interplay between public intervention, the burgeoning forces of the real estate market, and the enduring legacies of colonial governance. This historical interplay continues to set the stage for the complex, often contested, and perpetually evolving urban futures of India.

## CONCLUSION

The improvement trusts of colonial India were far more than simple civic bodies tasked with sanitation; they were foundational institutions that profoundly reconfigured the relationship between public authority, urban land, and the emerging real estate market. Their operations, driven by a complex interplay of urgent public health concerns and powerful financial imperatives, laid down the fundamental principles for modern Indian urban planning and land economics. By meticulously examining their distinctive legal constitution, their proactive role in land valorization and market speculation, and their far-reaching impact on diverse urban communities, we gain a crucial understanding of the deep historical contingencies that continue to define India's intricate urban landscape.

The "improvement regime," with its inherent and often paradoxical tensions between the declared pursuit of public welfare and an increasingly dominant logic of land financialization, remains an indispensable lens through which to analyze the ongoing challenges and opportunities in India's rapidly urbanizing future. This historical period introduced a technocratic mode of governance, where "experts" played a pivotal role in quantifying urban space and rationalizing interventions, often at the expense of established community structures

and traditional land uses. The trusts' transition into roles resembling that of developers and rentiers underscores how public bodies, initially conceived for collective good, became entangled with, and indeed propelled, capitalist accumulation in the urban sphere.

The legacy of these trusts is not merely a historical footnote but a continuous thread woven into the fabric of contemporary Indian cities. Many of the systemic issues related to equitable urban development, affordable housing, land dispossession, and the interplay of public and private interests in urban projects can be traced back to the foundational practices and principles established by these improvement trusts. What is often characterized as "neoliberal urbanism" today, with its emphasis on market-led development, land valorization, and selective urbanization, is in many respects a "discontinuous unraveling" of the very processes and rationalities forged during this colonial improvement regime.

Therefore, a historically informed and critically engaged approach to urban planning is imperative for India. Such an approach must recognize the enduring interplay of governance mechanisms, real estate dynamics, and deeply ingrained social inequities. By understanding how the concept of "improvement" was historically deployed to serve diverse and often conflicting interests—from colonial public health to capitalist profit—we can better navigate the complexities of urban development in the present. The profound and often challenging urban futures of India will undoubtedly continue to be shaped by the complex, centuries-old dance between grand visions of improvement, the relentless forces of the market, and the persistent quest for social equity within its bustling cities. The lessons from the improvement regime compel us to question whose "improvement" is truly served and at what cost, as India continues its trajectory of unprecedented urban transformation.

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21. Wacha, *Rise and Growth*, 20.
22. 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  
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27. The Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911 under the Bengal Act no. V of 1911, my emphasis.
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29. 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.
30. Raman, Bhavani, “Corporations,” in Valverde, Mariana, et al., eds., *Routledge Handbook of Law and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 108 Google Scholar.
31. Maitland, “Corporation Sole,” xxiv.
32. Ibid., 99–100.
33. Vevaina, *Trust Matters*, 3.
34. Datta, Partho, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta, c. 1800–1940* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012), 204 Google Scholar.
35. These terms do not come with specific citations since they are conspicuously present across all reports of the improvement trusts.
36. 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.
37. Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum*, 151.
38. For a discussion on the politics surrounding Bombay’s social welfare initiatives, see Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*.
39. The Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911.
40. Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 1.
41. “The Calcutta Improvement Scheme,” letter from Chamber to Government of Bengal (Legislative Department), Calcutta, 16 Dec. 1910, 449.
42. *Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust*, 1912–13.
43. Chhabria, *Making the Modern Slum*, 152.
44. Letter from Chamber to the Calcutta Corporation, 25 Nov. 1910.
45. 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).
46. Birla, *Stages of Capital*, 69.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 68, my emphasis.
49. Richards, *Condition*, 411.
50. Ibid., 320.
51. *Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust*, 1913–14, my emphasis.
52. Ibid.
53. Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 10.
54. Hart, Tom, “Urban Growth and Municipal Government,” in Slaven, Anthony and Aldcroft, Derek H., eds., *Business, Banking, and Urban Housing: Essays in Honour of S. G. Checkland* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1982), 199, 201.
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58. Home, Robert, “British Colonial Civic Improvement in the Early Twentieth Century: E. P. Richards in Madras, Calcutta, and Singapore,” *Planning Perspectives* 31, 4 (2016): 635–44.
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60. Richards, *Condition*, xv, his emphasis.
61. Ibid.
62. Bompas, “Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust,” 200.
63. Orr, *Bombay City Improvement*, 28.
64. Foucault, Michel, “Governmentality,” in Burchell, Graham, Gordon, Colin, and Miller, Peter, eds., *The*

- Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 87–104.
65. Scott, David, "Colonial Governmentality," Social Text 43 (1995): 191–220; Chatterjee, Partha, The Politics of the Governed: Reflections in Popular Politics in Most of the World (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
66. 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.
67. Letter from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce to the Government of Bengal, 16 Dec. 1910.
68. Proceedings of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1912–13.
69. See Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 80–119.
70. Tejani, Shabnum, "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.
71. Bompas, "Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust," 219.
72. Orr, Bombay City Improvement, 22.
73. Bompas, "Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust," 205.
74. Proceedings of Calcutta Improvement Trust, 1913–14.
75. Arnold, Caroline E., "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.
76. Ibid., 117.
77. Chhabria, Making the Modern Slum, 10.
78. Ibid., my emphasis.
79. Yates, Alexia, Real Estate and Global Urban History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.
80. 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.
81. Yates, Real Estate, 4.
82. Maitland, "Corporation Sole," 78.
83. Ibid., 4–5.
84. Richards, Condition, 430.
85. Rao, House, 24.
86. Vevaina, Trust Matters, 5.
87. Orr, Bombay City Improvement, 22. A lakh is a hundred thousand.
88. Ascher, Ivan, Portfolio Society: On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction (New York: Zone Books, 2016), 14, his emphasis.
89. Yates, "Double Life of Property."
90. 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.
91. Yates, "Double Life of Property", 250.
92. 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).
93. Tejani, Shabnum, "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.
94. 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.
95. 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.
96. Richards, Condition, 416.
  97. Christophers, Brett, "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.
  98. Orr, Bombay City Improvement, 13.
  99. Richards, Condition, 361.
  100. Letter from Sub-committee, Calcutta Improvement Scheme to President and Committee of the Chamber, 23 Nov. 1910, 457.
  101. Orr, Bombay City Improvement, 25.
  102. 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 Bhan, Gautam, "Notes on a Southern Urban Practice," *Environment and Urbanization* 31, 2 (2019): 639–54; Roy, Ananya, "What Is Urban about Critical Urban Theory?" *Urban Geography* 37, 6 (2016): 810–23; Sheppard, Eric, Leitner, Helga, and Maringanti, Anant, "Provincializing Global Urbanism: A Manifesto," *Urban Geography* 34, 7 (2013): 893–900.
  103. Quote from Mr. S. N. Mullik, quoted in Bompas, "Work of the Calcutta Improvement Trust," 216.
  104. *Ibid.*, 219.
  105. *Ibid.*, 217.
  106. Metcalf, Thomas R., *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 29.
  107. 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.
  108. 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.
  109. Asher E. Gartner, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)Google Scholar; Cowan, Thomas, *Subaltern Frontiers: Agrarian City-Making in Gurgaon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)10.1017/9781009118859CrossRefGoogle Scholar; Pati, Sushmita, *Properties of Rent: Community, Capital, and Politics in Globalising Delhi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)10.1017/9781009043694CrossRefGoogle Scholar.