India’s urban revolution: geographies of displacement beyond gentrification

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Abstract. This paper uses an analysis of key dynamics of sociospatial change in Indian cities to offer a sympathetic critique of recent efforts to extend gentrification theory into the Global South. Despite the postcolonial overtures of this new, Southern gentrification literature, the paper argues that the global search for gentrification risks following a diffusionist logic that either presumes a Euro-American template, or else so sheers gentrification of its analytical specificity that it loses both its explanatory power and its political potency. The paper shows that gentrification theory operates on four implicit presumptions, which fail to characterize the primary dynamics of urban change in India. These include: (1) the presumption that lower-class displacement is driven by a reinvestment of capital into disinvested spaces; (2) a property centrism; (3) an agnosticism on the question of extraeconomic force; and (4) the presumption that land from which lower classes are displaced finds a ‘higher and better use’. A priori commitment to the gentrification analytic thus overlooks key features of urban change in contexts, like India, with property, planning, and legal systems different from the postindustrial geographies from which gentrification theory developed. The paper suggests that ‘urban revolution’, ‘enclosures’, and ‘accumulation by dispossession’, while equally abstract terms, more clearly allow for the comparative analysis of displacement.

Keywords: enclosure, commons, right to the city, postcolonial city, slum, informality, comparative urbanism

1 Introduction
The past ten years have witnessed a vast increase in research charting the globalization of gentrification. While a decade ago gentrification studies remained almost entirely Western centric, there has since emerged a wave of interest in documenting the diffusion of gentrified landscapes across cities in the Global South. Smith (2002) helped inspire this Southern turn with his provocative claim that gentrification had become a ‘global urban strategy’. He has since suggested that the Global South is not just a new site of gentrifying cityscapes but, indeed, the leading edge of gentrification:

“gentrification is happening on a more massive scale in Shanghai or Mumbai ... than in the older post-industrialising cities of Europe, North America and Oceania” (Smith, 2008, page 196).

More grounded, case-study research has accordingly sought out and identified gentrification beyond this postindustrial core.

In line with Clark’s (2005, page 256) call for “a more inclusive perspective on the geography and history of gentrification”, this literature has not only confirmed empirically that gentrification has globalized, but also expanded the range of processes that fit within the gentrification rubric. Not just the gradual, market-driven process of rising rents and class succession (‘first wave gentrification’), or state-driven urban renewal policies (‘third-wave gentrification’) (Hackworth and Smith, 2001), the term ‘gentrification’ is being used increasingly to encompass processes with virtually no historical antecedent in the
20th-century Western city. Lees (2012a), for example, describes mass slum demolition in Chile, Pakistan, and India, as well as forced displacements in China, as gentrification. For Shin (2009) the conversion of informal housing into high-rise apartments in Seoul is classified as a state-driven, redevelopment-induced form of gentrification. And for McDonald (2008) apartheid-era forced removals in South Africa acquire the retrospective gloss of a racialized form of gentrification. This new, Southern gentrification literature is going to great lengths, in other words, to confirm ‘the generalization of gentrification’ thesis (Smith, 2008) and to support the claim that “the policies used to drive gentrification bear remarkable similarities in contexts as far apart as New Zealand, South Africa, India and England” (Shaw, 2008, page 2638).

The present paper offers a sympathetic critique of recent efforts to “explore if, and how, gentrification has travelled from the Global North to the Global South” (Lees, 2012ba page 155). It does so by using an analysis of contemporary forms of urban displacement in India to argue that ‘gentrification’, as a conceptual category, risks analytically ‘sugarcoating’—to use a criticism Slater (2006) leveled against the depoliticization of gentrification studies—transformations in the political economy of land in contexts that have property and planning systems, legal frameworks, and histories of land development significantly different from those in the postindustrial, Euro-American core from which gentrification theory developed. There are four reasons for this, which I state here and explore in greater detail, each in turn, in the following sections of the paper.

(1) Gentrification theory presumes a reinvestment of capital in already once-capitalized urban spaces. Whether as a ‘back to the city’ movement by people (Ley, 1996) or by capital (Smith, 1979); or as the more general redevelopment of disinvested housing stock, gentrification is not a suitable analytic for characterizing initial rounds of the capitalist production of space—the primary driver of displacement in many ‘emerging market’ cities today, including India.

(2) Gentrification was conceptualized in advanced capitalist countries with well-established private property regimes, whereas the primary forms of urban displacement in India (as in much of the South) involve the production of private property through urban enclosures, a far more fundamental transformation in urban space than is implied by gentrification.

(3) Gentrification assumes that the land in question is converted for a “higher and better use” (Smith 1996, page 62), a pattern that fails to materialize empirically in many Indian cities.

(4) Gentrification is agnostic on the question of extraeconomic force, whereas the question of how and where such force is applied sets the parameters for political contestation in India, as in much of the South.

While I argue my case with specific reference to India, I do so with the aim of pointing to (i) gentrification theory’s “empirical embeddedness” (Lemanski, forthcoming) in a Euro-American property system and (ii) the risks associated with extending this theory into contexts that have strong traditions of public landownership, socialistic land policies, or diverse, non-ownership-based tenure regimes, as is common in postsocialist and postcolonial cities. Thus, while Jones and Varley (1998, page 1548) have argued that “existing explanations of gentrification make cultural assumptions which may be inapplicable to societies with very different structures of class and gender relations”, I argue that gentrification theory similarly makes political–economic assumptions which are inapplicable to societies with different systems of property and planning.

To be clear, my argument is not that gentrification is not happening in Indian cities today. Recent international media coverage of rising rents in Delhi’s ultratrendy Hauz Khas Village (Mitter, 2013) and more careful historical analyses of Mumbai’s mill lands (Harris, 2008) confirm that market-driven displacement is alive and well in contemporary India. Nor is my aim to suggest that the use of the term gentrification in non-Western contexts is some sort of
epistemic violence. Rather, my concern here is with the increasing tendency, in and beyond
India, to classify a broad swath of mechanisms of displacement—from slum demolition,
to land privatization, to periurban enclosures—under the label ‘gentrification’, especially
when the forms of political opposition they generate have little in common with traditional
antigentrification struggles. For instance, in addition to Lees’s (2012a) and Smith’s (2008)
use of slum demolition in India as evidence of ‘gentrification generalized’, Desai (2012),
in an otherwise brilliant article on resettlement politics, describes slum removal along the
Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad as gentrification. Gooptu (2010) similarly encompasses a
diverse array of transformations in the land market across India’s large metros, including
slum removal and land privatization, with the term ‘gentrification’; and Banerjee-Guha
(2011a, page 77) presents Mumbai’s overall urbanization as part of “a universal process of
gentrification and restructuring of cities.” The problem here is not so much that gentrification
theory is being used to produce improper conclusions, as these works offer illuminating
insights into empirical dynamics on their own terms. Rather, it is that the act of summarizing
these dynamics as gentrification reduces the analytical clarity of these authors’ accounts.
In each case, far more fundamental changes in the city, such as the privatization of public
land, are at work than the rising rent environment and appearance of higher income groups
implied by gentrification. I therefore am not offering a critique of these particular authors,
but more pointing to reasons why gentrification research might not offer the ‘cosmopolitan’
and ‘postcolonial’ foundation which authors have recently assigned it (see Harris, 2008;
Lees, 2012a). In response to Lees’s (2012a, page 165) call to question “the usefulness and
applicability of the term as a conceptual frame for processes in the South”, I suggest that three
equally ‘mid-level’ theories more attentive to the processual dimensions of urban change
provide a more robust foundation for the comparative analysis of urban displacement. These
include urban revolution, enclosures, and accumulation by dispossession. These terms, already
widely used in the literature, are not meant to be exhaustive, nor are they unambiguous in the
processes they encompass. Nonetheless, I argue that their focus on causes and mechanisms,
rather than events and outcomes, makes them relatively better suited than ‘gentrification’ to
attend to geographies of displacement across diverse political economic contexts.

2 ‘Back to the city’: gentrification without reinvestment?

“A theory of gentrification will need to explain the detailed historical mechanisms of capital
depreciation in the inner-city and the precise way in which this depreciation produces the
possibility of profitable reinvestment.”

Smith (1979, page 542)

Gentrification has long been described as a gradual process of what Glass (1964, page xviii)
called the middle-class “invasion” of “working-class quarters”. This is a pattern that Butler
(2005, page 4) says “remains essentially as she [Glass] described it” and that continues to
inform how scholars approach the subject today. In Smith’s (1996) production-side theory of
gentrification, postwar suburbanization left behind a devalorized urban core, which provided
the economic landscape for subsequent reinvestment—his definition of gentrification. Ley’s
(1996) consumption-side theory, in contrast, describes gentrification as a ‘back to the city’
movement by the ‘new middle class’, a move precipitated by shifting consumer preferences
for inner-city living. While the causal mechanisms behind each theory of gentrification differ,
both theories begin with a post-industrial landscape from which both capital and the middle
class have already fled.

While much of the new Southern gentrification literature is analytically vague, when
causal mechanisms are identified authors tend to draw heavily from Smith’s production-side
theory (eg, Brennan 2007; Harris 2008; Lopez-Morales, 2011; Shin, 2009; Whitehead and
More, 2007). This is the case because alternative explanations of gentrification—such as
Ley’s consumption-driven argument, diverse works on the symbolic meaning of gentrified landscapes or on the cultural capital of gentrifiers (eg, Bridge, 2006), or arguments about a shift towards a postindustrial economy (Hamnett, 2003)—do not reflect the conditions in many Southern cities. Specifically, postcolonial scholarship has shown that consumer preferences, advertising cultures, metrics of prestige, and forms of immediation can have fundamentally distinct logics across cultural context (see Mazzarella, 2003). While there are numerous examples of the middle class’s symbolic reconquest of central city areas in the South (eg, Jones and Varley, 1998), the underlying motivations—such as walkability and access to schools—understood to drive ‘the gentry’ (a term with quite different meanings in a caste society such as India) ‘back to the city’ in the West cannot be assumed to operate elsewhere, especially in cities whose residential geography, as I discuss below, does not replicate the core–periphery pattern found in postindustrial cities. For the purposes of this paper I therefore follow the more production-side theory of gentrification adopted by most Southern gentrification studies.

In this production-side framework, the so-called ‘rent gap’ is the analytical means of describing “the precise way in which depreciation produces the possibility of profitable reinvestment.” The rent gap represents the difference between the actual ground rent earned from a piece of land and the potential rent that could be earned from the highest and best use, or a “higher and better use”, of that land (Smith, 1996, page 63). Gentrification hence is defined as the spatial expression of the reinvestment in neighborhoods that have experienced historical disinvestment, or a “‘cycle of delinquency’ whereby property maintenance, property value, and occupancy rates spiral downward in close relationship to each other” (Smith et al, 1989, page 240). As Smith (1996, page 193) writes, “it is possible to view disinvestment as a necessary if not sufficient condition for the onset of gentrification.”

For Smith, gentrification is hence characterized by a series of “returns” in the flow of capital: “economic reconquest” (1996, page xvii); a “rehabilitation” of existing housing stock (page 57); and a “spatial reconcentration” of capital and people (page 36). In Smith’s early work on the subject, he insisted upon a “a strict distinction” between the rehabilitation of existing stock and development that involved wholly new construction (Smith, 1979). Only the former, he argued at the time, constituted gentrification. While he later (Smith, 1996, page 36) tempered this position, opening up the term to include what is now called ‘new-build gentrification’ (Davidson and Lees, 2005), he maintains throughout his work a firm distinction between “the outward geographical expansion of the city”—or the general urbanization of land—and gentrification, which consists of a spatial reconcentration of capital driven by reinvestment in “whole neighborhoods of disinvested stock”.

Even in more general definitions of gentrification that dispense with an explicit production-side bent, the redevelopmental, reconcentrating, and reinvestment features of urban change remain prominent (see Clark, 2005, page 258). Literature on ‘third-wave gentrification’ and the state-driven ‘urban renaissance’ with which it is often associated also describes gentrification as a strategic response to sustained periods of urban decline, disinvestment, and middle-class flight (eg, Davidson, 2007; Lees, 2003), as does writing on rural gentrification (eg, Ghose, 2004). Even in scholarship where ‘gentrification’ is extended (to its extreme limits) to include such processes as the demolition of public housing projects, the broader geographical imaginary of gentrification remains tied to the project of “‘bring[ing] the middle classes back to the central city (read: gentrification)’” (Lees, 2012b, page 242).

This geography of postindustrial decline, middle-class flight, and lower-class displacement via reinvestment in disinvested neighborhoods, however, characterizes very little of former colonial cities. Colonial powers tended to maintain central urban areas as elite enclaves, consigning native populations to the administrative outskirts or the adjacent ‘black’
towns (see Davis, 2006, chapter 3). After becoming free of colonial control, postcolonial inner-city areas have continued to feature low relative densities and high relative rents due to their historic desirability and superior infrastructure, rising migration pressures from the peripheries, and the indigenous elite’s adoption of colonial templates of segregation. These cities, in other words, never experienced the cycles of disuse, vacancy, or disinvestment witnessed in Euro-American cities (UN Human Settlements Programme, 2003, page 81).

In the Indian context, the core areas of most cities have remained the privileged domain of the upper classes (Legg, 2007; Nair, 2005; Prakash, 2011). Also, the suburbanization of Indian cities has not followed the pattern of middle-class flight characteristic of North American cities (Rao, 2012). Furthermore, while India’s major cities have witnessed widespread factory closures, they remain productive industrially through small shops, informal assembly operations, and diffuse industrial clusters (Benjamin, 2004), making the ‘postindustrial’ label, and the postindustrial geography of gentrification, ill suited to these economies (Harris, 2012).

The analytical utility of gentrification in India becomes still murkier when it comes to the presumed pattern of reinvestment in a disinvested urban core. Take, for example, slum demolitions, the largest cause of displacement in contemporary Indian cities, and a process increasingly encompassed within the gentrification rubric, in and beyond India. As many as a million people were displaced from Delhi squatter settlements, and more than a half million displaced from Mumbai, in the 2000s (Doshi, 2013; Ghertner, 2012). India’s other large cities have witnessed roughly comparable scales of slum displacement when scaled to their relative population size. While some areas officially notified as slums, such as Delhi’s walled city, have undergone a gradual process of dilapidation, these are usually protected areas (they are ‘formal’ slums) that have experienced little lower-class displacement. Instead, most areas called ‘slums’ (or the more accurate vernacular terms, such as basti or kachchi abadi in northern India) emerged through the self-help housing practices of residents, who gradually expanded their homes as and when resources, time, and state support became available.

Slums, in other words, do not begin with a single infusion of capital that gradually loses value (Smith’s ‘use cycle’). Rather, they emerge through what can be called a vernacular production of space backed by sweat equity, not formal credit. While politicians are often involved in facilitating early squatting, and landlordism is quite common, early settlers typically produce these ‘homegrown neighborhoods’ (Echinove and Srivastava, 2012) by improving degraded land near waterways or train tracks; by filling in swampy, low-lying areas; by leveling and draining uneven terrain; and by assembling scrap materials and purchased construction supplies into evolving structures that, with time and tenure, transform incrementally from kachcha (temporary) huts of tarpaulin and sheet metal into pakka (permanent) homes of concrete or brick. This process of incremental investment is common to most of the world’s informal settlements, confirming that they are underinvested, not disinvested, areas that find incredibly productive uses of the scarce fixed capital available. Slum removal, therefore, does not fit the standard narrative of gentrification as reinvestment in disinvested space.

Setting aside the question of slum demolition, let us turn to the broader pattern of urban development in India. India has witnessed a massive increase in capital investment in its cities, which might on the surface suggest a central city remake in line with the gentrification narrative. Bannerjee-Guha (2011a) and Gooptu (2010), for example, describe Indian urbanization in these very terms: Bannejee-Guha citing the proposed redevelopment of Dharavi—often called Asia’s largest slum—and increasing capital inflows into urban real estate as her primary evidence. Since the late 1990s the Government of India has sought to increase systematically foreign direct investment (FDI) as a percentage of GDP. The key
mechanism for doing so has been to facilitate investment in real estate and infrastructure—the so-called ‘secondary circuit’ of capital. Its Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, launched in 2005, put in place a system of incentives, backed by some US$20 billion, to encourage municipal governments to liberalize their land markets through the dismantling of rent controls, the creation of municipal bond markets, the abolition of land-ceiling acts, and the relaxation of strict zoning laws. The Finance Ministry liberalized FDI restrictions for the real estate and construction sectors in the same year, lifting the previous 40% cap on foreign ownership. The real estate index of the Bombay Stock Exchange doubled over the following ten months. FDI inflows into Indian real estate more than quadrupled soon after, and property prices in India’s metropolises increased by as much as 500% through the 2000s, leading economists to discuss the possibility of “mak[ing] India a property-driven stock market”.(1)

Rising land prices through insertion into global financial markets fits what has become the standard narrative of gentrification by globalization (Banerjee-Guha, 2011b; Davidson, 2007). Yet, while large-scale infrastructure projects have led to considerable displacement, the expansion of India’s secondary circuit of capital has taken place primarily through the urbanization of periurban, rural, and protected land. Consider, for example, recent developments in Delhi. Millennial Delhi’s highest profile development project was the Commonwealth Games (CWG) Village, built on land reclaimed from the floodplain of the Yamuna River through a public–private partnership with the Dubai-based developer, Emaar. Once the CWG ended, the Delhi Development Authority purchased 711 of the Village’s luxury flats that had been used to house athletes during the event. It successfully auctioned off the first 80 of these flats in June 2012, leading to estimates that it would generate over US$500 million in profit off the 711 flats.(2) Here, capital found productive investment not in the rehabilitation of disinvested land, but in land that had never before been capitalized.

In the years leading up to the CWG, Delhi’s largest slums located just upstream from the site of the CWG Village had been demolished following a Supreme Court order to improve the quality of the floodplain. One could, noting the lower-class displacement on one side, and the rise of luxury flats on the other, call the overall pattern of development along the Yamuna riverbed ‘gentrification’. Yet, doing so would occlude the quite distinct legal and administrative processes that produced each outcome: public interest litigation against ‘the nuisance of slums’ and strict adherence to the Master Plan in the case of the former, and relaxation of land-use norms and modification of the Master Plan in the case of the latter (Ghertner, 2011). Delhi’s largest private developments were similarly built on undeveloped land: the Delhi Akshardham—the world’s largest Hindu monument and Delhi’s most visited tourist attraction—sits adjacent to the CWG village on the Yamuna riverbed, and India’s largest shopping mall complex was built on the Delhi Ridge, a protected green space. The same process is well underway across urban India, be it the more than 300 residential layouts and resorts built on Bangalore’s greenbelt (Nair, 2005, page 155) or the dozens of gated communities constructed on Hyderabad’s 500 urban water bodies (Maringanti, 2011). The big story of land dispossession and property investment in India, however, is taking place not in its city centers but, rather, on the booming peripheries and in its smaller cities: in the satellite cities of Gurgaon and NOIDA in the National Capital Region, in the corridor between Mumbai and Pune, in Kolkata’s New Town, and in the edge settlements beyond Bangalore’s Electronic City. This is India’s “urban revolution”—a term Lefebvre (2003) used to describe the rise of ‘urban society’ and to account for a secular shift in capital

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(1) Rajesh Abraham, “DLF IPO to make India a property-driven stock market” *The Hindu* New Delhi, 26 April 2006.

(2) K Vikram, 2012. “Delhi CWG flats auctioned, highest bid at Rs.7.31 crore” *India Today* 22 May.
from its primary, or industrial, circuit into its secondary, or property-based, circuit. Urban revolution is a concept suited to describing the rapid influx of surplus capital into real estate in emerging markets and the concomitant production of capitalist space in areas previously used for commoning, subsistence or other purposes not defined primarily by ground-rent maximization. Unlike ‘gentrification’, which implies a reinvestment in already-capitalized spaces, ‘urban revolution’, on this formulation, can be taken to mean the incorporation of new areas into formal property markets via the financial instruments of real estate (deeds, mortgages, assessments, property taxes, etc).

India’s urban revolution is proceeding on its periurban fringes through millions of small land transactions. Here, land aggregators “use a mix of charm and violence to convince farmers to sell individual parcels of land” (Subramaniam, 2011), which is then aggregated and alienated to developers, ready with architectural plans and promotional materials for vast private townships. A model flat might emerge on the land a year later; and most flats will be sold before a single brick is laid, the money being recycled for further land purchase, a process that pushes urban land acquisition deeper into the countryside and leaves a widening wake of dispossession.

India’s urban revolution therefore resembles not Smith’s (1996) ‘new urban frontier’ of reclaimed inner city land but, rather, Frederick Jackson Turner’s older, expansionary, frontier associated with the westward colonization of 19th-century America. As Gautam Bhan, a consultant with the Indian Institute of Habitat Studies, says of Indian urban growth: “In the absence of land market regulation, it’s like the Wild West out there” (quoted in Subramaniam, 2011, page 45). On these peripheries, commercially underutilized spaces that function as commons for poorer users are being inserted into global property markets for the first time.

Where land aggregators and real estate brokers cannot prize land away from farmers, village heads, or marginal cultivators fast enough, the state intervenes. State land acquisition for urban development has hence increased drastically in the past decade, both through existing land acquisition laws and through India’s Special Economic Zone Act (2005), which expanded state powers of eminent domain so as to create superliberalized enclaves run (unlike China’s special economic zones—SEZs) by private developers. India has 143 SEZs in operation, with more than 600 additional SEZs approved for future development—which will require more than half a million acres of new land. Many SEZs exist near urban land markets, and the requirement that only half the acquired land be used for productive purposes gives developers the opportunity to use the remaining land for luxury housing and retail—“the real draw of the SEZ for most developers” (Levien, 2012, page 934).

If ‘gentrification’ has historically been defined as the return of capital to already capitalized, yet devalorized, areas, then India’s urban revolution looks decidedly unlike gentrification. The ‘gentrification’ label is even less suited to characterizing the geographies of displacement in urban India when one considers the disjuncture between India’s diverse tenure systems and the property-centrism of gentrification theory.

3 Property centrism: gentrifying the public city?
The largest form of lower class displacement taking place today in India, as in cities throughout the South (Davis, 2006), is slum demolition. Slum removal, whether in order to convert the cleared land to a ‘higher and better use’, as in the proposed scheme to redevelop Dharavi (Banerjee-Guha, 2011a), or for purposes of beautification, as in the Sabarmati Redevelopment Project in Ahmedabad (Desai, 2012), has increasingly been described as ‘gentrification’ in India. Lees’s (2012a) argument in favor of a more globally ambitious gentrification research agenda further treats slum removal across diverse contexts in Asia, including India, as a form of gentrification. If we take gentrification in its broadest formulation to consist of the displacement of lower-class residents from urban areas, along with an infusion of fresh
capital to remake those areas for a ‘higher and better use’, then slum removal seems to fit the
gentrification mold. Yet, is this the most useful account of slum demolition?

Most slums are settled on public land and, despite the obviousness of this fact, the
significance of dispossessing populations from their historical entitlement (de facto or
de jure) to a city’s public land is rarely acknowledged. Even in ethnographic accounts of
slum removal, the specificities of land enclosure and private property creation—a political
economic shift—are given scant attention in relation to the transformation from informal
to formal land use—a regulatory shift. I therefore dwell briefly here on the history of slum
formation in India with the aim of showing the analytical error committed in calling
slum demolition and other forced displacements from public land ‘gentrification’.

India, like most newly post-colonial and post-revolution nations in the mid-20th century
(eg, China, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Mexico, Tanzania, Vietnam), adopted socialistic land
policies. In rural areas this meant experiments with land reform. In urban areas this meant
devising planning and property laws to shepherd unequal societies towards the dual goals of
development and social reform. In Delhi’s first Master Plan, a model that other Indian cities
would follow, there were two key pillars of socialized land. First, 25% of all residential land was
reserved for the two lowest income categories and, second, a system of public land management
was put in place, under which the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was given monopoly
power over the acquisition and disposal of all urban land. Under this system, land users were
issued use rights on a leasehold, not freehold, basis, and the transfer of such rights between
private parties, at least in theory, had to go through an approval process intended to ensure
that such transactions were in the public interest. Postcolonial Indian cities (at least those that
followed the Delhi model) thus did not begin with strict private property-based, tenure regimes.

In China, Cuba, and Vietnam, socialistic land policies were a natural extension of
communist ideology; in Delhi, India’s capital city and primary site of early urban policy
experimentation, such policies had a pragmatic origin. After Partition, a million refugees
from the newly formed Pakistan descended upon Delhi (Pandey, 2001, page 122). The Delhi
Administration, the predecessor of the DDA, required access to whole new urban areas
to meet the housing needs of the refugee population. Private developers, most notably a
company called Delhi Lease and Finance, had begun purchasing large tracts of agricultural
land in Delhi in this period, some of which they developed into elite neighborhoods, and
others which they held onto in anticipation of future increases in land price. The principles
of socialized land introduced into the first Master Plan emerged as a response to Delhi Lease
and Finance’s speculative practices, which had begun to hinder the DDA’s ability to access
land affordably (Sundaram, 2009). Entrusting all urban land to a public-spirited regulator,
the DDA, and reserving a quarter of residential land for the poor became the new Indian
state’s means of building a more equitably planned national capital and setting a model for
provincial state governments to follow.

Despite its lofty targets for low-income housing, however, plan implementation proved
difficult. The DDA and private labor contractors, who recruited teams of workers from
surrounding states to build the newly planned areas, created labor camps on vacant land
beside their worksites. Because many of the construction projects at that time consisted of
building entire residential colonies, the labor camps became semipermanent and, instead
of formal low-income units being constructed to house workers and their families, these
camps were allowed to persist, forming what are today called jhuggi-jhompdi clusters, or
slums. Indeed, the DDA built less than 10% of the required low-income housing in its first
fifty years of existence (Verma, 2002).

As these camps grew, local politicians recognized the opportunity to mobilize the
laboring population for electoral advantage. Thus, bureaucrats and politicians seeking to
solidify their influence offered ration cards and later voter ID cards to slum residents in exchange for political support. These documents provided a form of de facto tenure security. Later settlements secured access to vacant public land using political benefactors’ leverage to broker deals with bureaucrats—what Benjamin (2008) calls ‘occupancy urbanism’.

The story of slums in India, then, is in part a story of the state’s failure to supply the urban poor with the housing to which it was entitled—what Verma (2002, page 36) calls “the great terrain robbery”. But, it is also the story of public land being made available for squatting and low-cost housing. We can be critical of the miserable conditions in which many slum dwellers live, but the fact remains that a quarter to a half of the population in India’s large cities lives on public land supplied through these means. A highly favorable reading of this arrangement would therefore suggest that, in the absence of the resources to develop formal low-income housing, India’s developmental state extended the right to occupy public land to the poor as a type of social welfare. While the urban poor occupy far less of the land to which they are entitled, that such a quantum of land exists is a function of a distinct history of socialistic planning and public claims to the city. The history of slums, therefore, in addition to being a history of the vernacular production of space described above, is a history of the public city. The current politics of slum demolition must hence be read as a story of the end of the public city—a fundamental shift in the meaning of the urban that goes beyond the issues of rent or cost of living (although these, of course, matter).

While the timing has varied from state to state, Indian cities have witnessed a gradual erosion of their socialistic land policies since the late 1990s. In 1999 the DDA launched its first commercial auctions, selling ‘underutilized’ land (parks, vacant land) that it had acquired for public purposes in order to generate revenue and encourage capital investment. In 2000 the DDA initiated its Freehold Conversion Program, which allowed leaseholders to obtain freehold rights, thereby setting in place a private property system—that is, land could be bought and sold in an unregulated market—for the first time since the DDA was established in 1955. When the Delhi Master Plan was updated in 2007, it cleared the books of the last remnants of the policy of socialized land by deleting the passages mandating land reservations for the urban poor. Fifty years ago the DDA was set up to prevent the speculative land practices of a developer named Delhi Lease and Finance. Today that same company, now known simply as DLF, has become the largest developer in Delhi (and in all of India), confirming the end of Delhi as a public city—a pattern echoed in the ‘speculative urbanism’ common across India (Goldman, 2011).

Slums are not a passive stage in land privatization. Rather they function as a central vehicle for facilitating the alienation of public land to private developers. India’s new national-level program to create a ‘slum-free India’, called the Rajiv Awas Yojana, has enshrined this process into national policy through its heavy promotion of public–private partnerships in slum rehousing. This model gives developers access to valuable slum land in exchange for an obligation to rehouse the displaced slum dwellers in a portion of the multistory flats built on the site—a process known as transfer of development rights (TDR). This is the model proposed in Mumbai’s Dharavi Redevelopment Project, which Banerjee-Guha (2011a) describes as gentrification, a description that omits the production of private property, or urban enclosure, at the root of this process. Since its early adoption, TDR requirements in many cities have been relaxed so that developers can use prime slum land entirely for luxury housing—provided they build resettlement housing for displaced slum dwellers elsewhere in the city, usually on peripheral land.

Given its specific formulation within and focus on well-established private property markets, I argue that gentrification is not a suitable concept for explaining slum demolition and related forms of urban displacement common in contemporary India. Thus, while Lees
(2012a, page 165) argues that there is a problem with the fact that “the vast literature on ‘slums’ pays little attention to the gentrification literature”, I see slum removal and gentrification as distinct processes. Calling slum demolition ‘gentrification’ is akin to arguing that gentrification is the most appropriate term for describing the privatization of public housing in Western cities. While scholars have examined the links between such privatization and gentrification, this literature treats gentrification as a process that takes hold within already-privatized housing stock (see Forrest and Murie, 1995), and not as a descriptor of this shift in tenure itself (Ginsburg, 2005). I therefore argue, in line with other scholars of urban India (Baviskar and Gidwani, 2011; Gidwani and Reddy, 2011), that ‘enclosure’ is a more useful concept for the comparative study of urban displacement.

‘Enclosure’ is a term historically used to describe the privatization of public or commonable land into exclusively owned plots and the concomitant elimination of long-standing use rights to that land. This emphasis on the process of alienating common or public lands to private hands helps bring into focus the shared struggles of the dispossessed—from dam displacees, to slum evictees, to those facing the privatization of public housing projects—to defend various commons. Like that on gentrification, literature on enclosure lays bare the explicit class basis of capital accumulation—Thompson (1963, page 237) described enclosures as “a plain enough case of class robbery”—and aims to build a politics of solidarity across rural–urban and North–South divides; it further retains an explicit focus not only on what is lost through dispossession, but also on what is gained through preserving and expanding collective and common ways of being (De Angelis, 2004; Retort, 2005). While gentrification scholarship aims to build similar forms of solidarity, the distributional politics of land access highlighted by gentrification often differ from the sharper forms of enclosure at work in many places. Thus, while antigentrification struggles hinge centrally on preventing deepened commoditization, struggles against enclosure resist the conversion of land (or other resources, be it the human genome or seed stock) into the commodity form in the first place. Protest against slum demolition, for example, takes place not around rent control, housing subsidies, landlord intimidation, or zoning—areas often highlighted in antigentrification struggles—but, rather, around the preservation of public land and the defense of the public city. If the urban process under capitalism is one in which urban space is increasingly defined based on its function in producing exchange value—what Lefebvre (2003, page 155) calls “selling space, bit by bit”—then struggles in defense of land yet to be sold, bit by bit, represent the starkest frontier of anticapitalist struggle and should not be absorbed into analytical blueprints that subsume this detail into a politics of rent. Building on the growing literature that sees urban commons as spaces and practices continuously produced (and continuously enclosed by capital), we can note how antigentrification struggles in well-developed property markets are acts of commoning as much as are Southern struggles against land privatization. While the latter risk losing common access to public land, the former risk being dispossessed of the diverse forms of street life they seek to maintain in the face of rising rents. In this way, ‘enclosure’ both is more analytically robust than ‘gentrification’ and allows struggles against dispossession across North and South to be conceptually and politically linked.

4 Higher and better use: vacant gentrification?
In the previous section I described how cleared slum land in India is being transformed into private property. However, not all slum demolition follows this pattern. Consider, for example, the case of Ravi Das Camp, a slum that was located in a middle-class west Delhi neighborhood until it was demolished in May 2006. Ravi Das Camp was established in the early 1980s, when a government contractor settled his construction workers on the site, following the procedure outlined in section 2. By the early 1990s the surrounding area had been built up, and Ravi Das Camp had grown into a settlement housing nearly 3000 residents,
flanked on all sides by middle-class housing societies. In 2002 the residents’ associations representing these societies filed a petition in the High Court demanding the settlement’s removal on the grounds of its being a nuisance to the private homeowners.

The majority of the slum demolitions carried out in millennial Delhi were set in motion by this very sort of quality-of-life petition (Ghertner, 2012). In March 2006 the High Court responded to the petition against Ravi Das Camp in the same terms that it had done in dozens of other cases: “The whole area has been converted into a garbage landfill. No legal right is vested in the encroachers.”\(^{(3)}\) Six weeks later, Ravi Das Camp residents received news that their homes would be demolished. One week later, the bulldozers and police showed up. Six activists associated with Kislay, a local NGO, were detained preemptively to prevent protest, and three bulldozers and a team of men armed with sledgehammers, backed by riot police, began razing the 600+ homes on site. Eligible families were later trucked to a resettlement colony 40 km away.

While neither the petition nor the final court order mentioned this, an early layout plan for the area had demarcated a portion of the land on which Ravi Das Camp was settled for a government hospital. A larger area hospital had been built in the interim, and the DDA, with no plan to use the cleared land, erected a concrete fence around the lot’s edges.

I returned to the site in 2012. In place of a robust economic neighborhood that included numerous small carpentry shops, provisions stores, food service businesses, and an NGO office, a nonproductive urban jungle had grown. The DDA’s concrete fence had been broken through and a cow had entered to graze; a pile of rubbish was smoldering in the corner; and the laughter of a group of boys echoed from behind the greenery. In six years this land had yet to find its ‘higher and better use’, a notion that sits at the core of Smith’s definition of the rent gap, or the gap between “on the one side, the currently capitalized ground rent under present use and, on the other, the potential ground rent that could be appropriated with the conversion of the building stock to a higher and better use through reinvestment in gentrification” (Smith, 1996, page 193; also see Clark, 1987).

The pattern of cleared slum land remaining barren, without any ‘higher and better use’, is common in Delhi. In an evaluation of the land-use status of slums demolished after 1990, Dupont (2008) found that out of sixty-seven former slum sites, sixty-six were at least partially vacant. The site of the Pushta settlements that once housed approximately 150 000 residents along the Yamuna River’s banks, cleared in Delhi’s largest ever demolition exercise in 2004, remains vacant to this day.

As has been widely observed in the Indian context, a primary justification for slum removal over the past decade has been beautification aimed at giving core urban areas a world-class look (Baviskar, 2011; Ghertner, 2010). Lees (2012a, page 164), describing mass displacements throughout Asia (including India), argues that such beautification drives are self-evidently gentrification: “The major reason for these evictions was/is ‘the beautification of the city’ (read gentrification).” Yet, as Delhi shows, much of the land cleared of slums falls into disuse, or is converted into open spaces—a reduction in land capitalization. While urban beauty creates positive externalities that support nearby property values, cleared or beautified land does not necessarily experience either capital intensification or the class succession presumed in the gentrification literature. Scholars therefore need to attend to precise patterns of land change before applying the ‘gentrification’ label to spaces of displacement. The incorporation of diverse landscapes of dispossession into claims of gentrification’s ‘generalization’ or ‘global spread’ risks losing this precision.

\(^{(3)}\) CWP 593/2002 in the High Court of Delhi, 8 March 2006.
5 Extraeconomic coercion: blunt force gentrification?

Davis (2006) calls the proliferating forms of slum demolition in the Third World ‘Haussmann in the tropics’. While key components of Haussmann’s 19th-century Paris remake are missing in Southern cities—not least the ‘proto-Keynesian’ aim of employment generation (Harvey, 2003)—the concept of Haussmannization does capture one important feature of displacement in these contexts: the use of extra-economic force. Consider, for example, the press release shown in box 1, which was issued by Bangalore-based NGOs in defense of public land. This statement describes the demolition of a mixed area of squatter housing and government quarters intended for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS)—an official low-income category—to make way for a private development following the public–private partnership model described in section 3.

This statement resembles the dozens of antieviction press releases issued each year by Indian housing NGOs. Its strongest protest is against the state’s discretionary use of force to evict. It further responds to the common practice of state agencies failing to provide written notice prior to demolition. I reproduce this particular statement both because it makes explicit the centrality of force, and because it describes the demolition of government quarters, thereby demonstrating the commonality of such force beyond slum demolition which I have been discussing primarily.

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Press Release

Demolition of EWS quarters and the Eviction of Residents

Saturday, January 19, 2013, Bangalore

The BBMP [the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation] today began the demolition of homes and evicting residents from the EWS [Economically Weaker Section] quarters at Ejipura. During the process of demolition and eviction, protestors were lathi [baton] charged, physically dragged by the police and arrested—all of them women. They have been remanded to judicial custody till next Tuesday. These women have been separated from their families and homes, and cannot protect their shelters and belongings from the demolition bulldozers.

The BBMP official, BT Ramesh who was at the spot could not produce any official documents that showed that he and his crew had the authority to demolish structures and evict residents. Nor did he produce any copy of the notification supposedly shared with the residents a month back. … All the residents that we spoke to had not been notified and were unaware of this [planned] demolition drive.

In a meeting with the BBMP Commissioner today, Mr. Siddaiah agreed to stop demolitions of the occupied homes and to give a time period of 3 months for evacuation. In fact, Mr. Siddaiah called BT Ramesh in [the] presence of activists and residents. However, the demolition continued unabated; Mr. Ramesh insisted on a written order from [the] Commissioner’s office, who conveniently disappeared by then. As of this afternoon, the police had given a 6 pm notice to the residents to clear their belongings. As of now, as many as 500 homes have been razed to the ground by the BBMP bulldozers today [sic]. Many families are out on the streets, since they do not have the finances or support to re-locate. …

We, the members of civil society, representing different organisations (PUCL, PDF, and Concern) condemn the deplorable and inhuman way the demolitions, police violence and evictions have been implemented. We call for an immediate and complete halt to the eviction of residents and the demolition of occupied homes in the EWS quarters. We further demand that all charges against the residents and activists be dropped.

Issued by: People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), People’s Democratic Forum (PDF) & Concern - Bangalore

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Box 1. Press release issued by PUCL, a Bangalore-based NGO.

(4) The full press release is available at http://puckarnataka.org/?p=679.
Housing activists and their legal representatives in India have noted an increased tendency in recent years to demolish first and ask questions later, despite state policies that require the provision of resettlement prior to demolition. The regulatory ambiguity (e.g., how to assure compensation when evictees no longer live on site) and drawn-out legal disputes that follow guarantee considerable attrition among the displaced—reducing the cost of compensation.

This increasing use of state force to clear land for private development has led observers to describe India’s property-led development in terms of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (ABD) (Harvey, 2002). I dwell here on the analytical purchase of ABD because, while it has proven incredibly useful in pointing to the explicit role of state violence in opening new terrains for capital accumulation, it has featured surprisingly little in the gentrification literature. This, I argue, reflects gentrification’s agnosticism about the role of extraeconomic force, a feature that makes it particularly ill suited to spaces of violent dispossession.

Harvey coined the term ‘accumulation by dispossession’ as a way to update Marx’s “so-called primitive accumulation”—the “historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx, 1867 [1990], page 875)—for conditions of advanced capitalism. Harvey differentiates ABD from ‘expanded reproduction’, or a ‘normal’ accumulation process involving increasing intensities of capital and labor that combine through market mechanisms. According to De Angelis (2004, page 67), citing Marx, what distinguishes ‘primitive accumulation’/ABD from ‘normal accumulation’ is that the separation of producers from the means of production in the former “is imposed primarily through ‘[d]irect extra-economic force’, such as the state or particular sections of social classes” (original emphasis). In other words, ABD “is a social process in which separation appears as a crystal-clear relation of expropriation, a relation that has not yet taken the fetishistic character assumed by capital’s normalisation, or the ‘ordinary run of things’.” (5) In this formulation “the ordinary run of things” includes the existing institutionally structured marketplace, or the organization of production, consumption, and exchange as shaped by laws, norms, and governance. Forms of dispossession that take place through the institutionally structured marketplace would then fall into the camp of ‘expanded reproduction’. Prohibitively high rents, landlord-issued eviction notices, and speculative property purchase fit within this sphere. In contrast, ABD accounts for forms of accumulation that require the application of direct extraeconomic coercion, such as eminent domain, slum demolition, land grabbing, dam-induced displacement, and the like. Harvey is ambiguous on the role of extraeconomic force in his own work; he includes such things as pension stripping and predatory lending in ABD in his initial formulation of the term. However, De Angelis (2004) and Levien (2012) convincingly show that a means-based definition of expropriation that is explicit about the presence of coercive force is the only analytical basis for differentiating ABD from expanded reproduction. The presence of such force, they further argue, following Marx, structures the terms on which class struggle takes place and thus must remain explicit for political, not only analytical, reasons.

Where does gentrification fit in the expanded reproduction/ABD schema? Early gentrification literature typically located gentrification within the sphere of expanded reproduction, emphasizing rent-induced displacement: “Displacement from gentrification is seldom caused by government officials using the power of eminent domain” (Swanstrom and Kernstein, 1989, page 267). Glass’s (1964) founding statement on gentrification-as-middle-class ‘invasion’ clearly read gentrification as a market-driven process led by ‘pioneers’ taking risks in an existing accumulation environment. State involvement here was seen in terms of

(5) See Levien (2012) for a compelling argument as to why ABD is a preferable term to ‘primitive accumulation’ for describing contemporary forms of ‘land grabbing’. He works Harvey’s terminology through De Angelis’s (2004) reading of Marx to give the former the analytical specificity of the latter, a convention I follow here.
the enforcement of property law or through the less direct institutional work of changing the regulatory environment. As Angotti (2008) observes of the US context, gentrification emerged as an academic term in contrast to earlier, demolition-driven and eminent domain-driven, processes of urban renewal.

Gentrification research has since acknowledged the central role of state violence, but offers little insight into how and when such violence is required. Smith’s (1996) examination of “gentrification and the revanchist city”, the subtitle of his book, is instructive here. Revanchist urban policy, with its emphasis on policing, makes it appear that more coercive strategies are part of the same patterns of displacement as those operating through the institutionally shaped market—“the ordinary run of things”. The two of course come together, depend on each other, and are important components of neoliberalizing urban regimes, but we should resist either assuming that they are the same thing or categorizing them as divergent manifestations of a unified logic. Thus, while Smith begins his book with a dramatic example of state violence—riot police forcibly evicting homeless squatters from Tompkins Square Park—we later learn that homelessness was the outcome of earlier market-induced displacement, and that the protests in defense of Tompkins were “one last metaphorical stand” in a longer history of silent evictions and rising rents (Smith, 1996, page 8). While riot police were required to ‘clean up’ this last bastion of lower-class grit, gentrification consisted of a precipitous climb in ground rents, which drove lower-class groups out of apartments and into homelessness. This is the “violence of eviction” to which Smith (1996, page 27) refers—a market violence of landlord eviction notices, declining public housing allotments, and the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx, 1867 [1990], page 899). I do not mean to downplay the profound significance of this violence, or to deny the central role of the police in laying the disciplinary groundwork for the market’s ‘normal’ operation, but I do insist on the need for a clear identification of who is being displaced and how, for the target of antieviction struggle depends vitally on understanding which legal, extralegal, or market-based mechanisms are to be challenged.

If capitalist development proceeds dialectically through forms of class struggle that arise in and through regimes of accumulation, then attention to the particular ‘regimes of dispossession’ (Levien, 2012) that shape the degree of state violence required to facilitate accumulation needs to be consistently clarified rather than elided. Contra gentrification studies, work on ABD makes such mechanisms clear, suggesting the analytical risk of subsuming different mechanisms of displacement into a single conceptual rubric—gentrification or any other. Gentrification scholars seeking to apply their toolkits to contexts marked more prominently by state force miss this point when they try to absorb the difference between ABD and ‘the ordinary run of things’ by adding modifiers like ‘sharper edged’ (Harris, 2008) or ‘mega’ (Lees, 2012a, page 163) to ‘gentrification’. This is because these adjectives suggest issues of mere magnitude or scale and elide the qualitative difference between force and normalized market expropriation. Lees (2012a) uses the language of state-led gentrification to try to account for more forceful displacement in the South, but this term remains agnostic on the question of extraeconomic force, for it specifies the agent of change, not the means, and has, in most of the literature, referred primarily to regulatory and policy modifications.

The claim that ‘gentrification’ is agnostic about the role of extraeconomic force is not to suggest that Indian cities, or cities in the South more generally, are somehow more violent, or that such force is absent in the North. Rather, I argue that where this force is applied in the North, such as in eminent domain proceedings, gentrification is rarely the preferred framework of analysis. Why then use the term to describe those same processes in the South? I also insist that the violent forms of displacement underway in the South should not be treated as more extreme or malignant versions of what is underway in the Western city, a risk
introduced by terms such as ‘sharper-edged gentrification’. In contrast to gentrification, ABD is a means-specific analytic that “invites comparative research into its conjunctural economic role and political outcome in different times and places” (Levien, 2012, page 942).

6 Conclusion
In the face of increasing attempts to apply the ‘gentrification toolkit’ to the Global South, this paper has sought to offer a warning against the tendency to confirm gentrification at the level of the empirical (manifestations and effects) at the expense of the real (mechanisms and causes). As gentrification research has diversified in the wake of the production-versus-consumption debates, gentrification, as a category, has become increasingly generalized. By this, I do not mean the same thing as Smith (2008), whose claim of ‘gentrification generalized’ is that similar strategies and processes of urban renewal are proliferating across diverse contexts. Rather, I mean that gentrification, as a concept, has come to operate as an umbrella term for a general outcome of class transformation, regardless of its widely divergent underlying causes and implications.

As Lees notes, the process included under gentrification “is a very Anglo-American one rooted in the social and economic changes occurring in postwar cities in Britain and North America.” She includes within this process “deindustrialization, suburbanization, disinvestment and ethnic or class ghettoization in the inner city, the transition to a postmodern society and a postmodern culture, and most important, the rise of what David Ley called a ‘new cultural class’—a liberal new middle class that was predisposed to central city living” (Lees, 2012b, page 241). These are neither the dominant dynamics of the Indian city, nor of many postsocialist and postcolonial cities currently being incorporated into gentrification research. While Lees uses this definition to argue that the range of processes encompassed by “gentrification” needs to be expanded “to decolonize the gentrification literature” (2012b, page 164), I argued that to develop a ‘properly postcolonial’ comparative urban research agenda (Robinson, 2011), we must resist the diffusionist temptation to explain change ‘there’ by testing it against theory ‘here’. The demand that urban theory be provincialized, in other words, is not a call to circulate straightforwardly existing concepts on a more global scale—to ask how they travel and work (or do not) in different places. It is, rather, an insistence that scholars acknowledge that all theory is geographically specific, that all extensions of theory are simultaneously a form of geographical comparison, and that the act of elevating the particular to the general carries with it the burden of asking what kinds of particulars are allowed to speak beyond their contexts.

I argued that there are four such particulars, or presumptions, central to gentrification research that limit gentrification’s ‘generalizability’: (1) that gentrification operates upon a historically disinvested landscape; (2) that it works through private property markets; (3) that it produces ‘higher and better’ land uses; and (4) that it does not require, although may rely on, the use of extraeconomic force. On this basis, we may question the applicability of gentrification theory to contexts (i) that have not experienced historical disinvestment; (ii) that have mixed, non-ownership-based tenure arrangements; (iii) that feature displacement without redevelopment for a higher and better use; or (iv) that depend on the application of extraeconomic force.

The risk of extending the gentrification framework to such contexts is more than analytical, however. It is also political. Scholars have retained usage of the term ‘gentrification’ even where it is acknowledged to lack analytical specificity because of the promise that it offers to build solidarity across disparate experiences of displacement (Butler, 2007). Gentrification hence has to be evaluated in part on its ability to speak to common experiences and struggles. Yet, if gentrification historically has described forms of displacement within well-established private property markets with well-established legal frameworks for adjudicating acceptable
conditions of dispossession, then the act of calling antidisplacement efforts in the South ‘antigentrification’ struggles risks concealing more than it reveals. This is because organized resistance to displacement in much of the South is opposed to the production of private property and the application of state force. As I have argued, these struggles oppose not deepening commoditization (the definition of gentrification), but the process of producing cities as a commodity in the first place. If a more inclusive public city is to be imagined and created, the unique prevalence of huge swaths of now-threatened public land in areas facing rapid enclosures today needs to be acknowledged. Gentrification risks eliding this fact, confusing the defense of public land with struggles over the uneven development of already-privatized space.

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