

INCOMPLETENESS

Siddharth Menon

Concrete is never finished. For millions of marginalized people, the perpetual incompleteness of concrete infrastructures, and the ongoing project of their incremental construction, lend themselves to dreams of equality. They also generate unique forms of governance and profitability. Like microloans and other accessible forms of participation in capitalist enterprise, artisanal uses of concrete also have the power to induce protracted incompleteness, stunted upward mobility, and partial inclusion. This chapter explores how one man living in northern India begins, but cannot complete, his concrete home.



It was a warm summer day in July 2017. I was in Kandbari village on the outskirts of Palampur city in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. While walking along the cobblestone path adjoining the village school, I admired the quintessential *peepal* tree that adorned its spacious courtyard. Just then, the metal bell rang, signaling the end of another school day. Hordes of students, dressed in white shirts and navy-blue shorts and skirts, rushed out of its gates all at once.



Figure 22.1. Beherchand, standing in front of his incomplete *pucca* house. Photo by the author.

While trying to navigate my way out of this crowd, I noticed someone gesturing to me from afar. It was Beherchand, a local carpenter, with whom I had previously worked during my stint as a site-architect in Kandbari from 2011 to 2014. He greeted me with a tight hug, held my wrist, and led me up a narrow winding trail along the slippery embankment of a stream. Beherchand wanted to show me his brand-new concrete house that he had begun to construct for his family. After precariously navigating our way up the trail, careful not to fall into the chilly water, we took a sharp left through a thick grove of guava trees and stood in-front a modestly sized brick and concrete house (see fig. 22.1).

The house had three rooms including a kitchen and was built on a high stone plinth. Piles of brick, bamboo scaffolding, and empty cement bags lay strewn around the construction site. Wet jute bags, soaked in water, had been wrapped around the concrete pillars for curing. Kiln brick walls had been built up to the lintel level of the house but had been left un-plastered. Wooden door and window frames had been fastened to these



Figure 22.2. A *kuccha* house in Kandbari village. Photo by the author.

walls using metal holdfasts, but they lacked any shutters. Steel rebar was protruding from the column tops, gently swaying in the mountain breeze, signaling Beherchand's intention to construct a reinforced cement concrete (RCC) roof or an additional floor above. A feeling of pride had engulfed Beherchand when he showed me his new concrete house.

Until now, Beherchand had lived in his ancestral *kuccha* (raw, uncooked, or impermanent, in Hindustani) house with his ageing parents and his brother's family. But his expanding family needs and his desire to showcase a high social status in the village had spurred Beherchand into building his own *pucca* (ripe, cooked, or permanent) house. In Kangra, *kuccha* houses signify social backwardness and poverty, and are associated with a caste-based, feudal lifestyle filled with the drudgery and precarity of primary-sector jobs, like agriculture or forestry (see fig. 22.2.). In contrast, *pucca* houses denote values of progress and modernity, and are associated with a post-agrarian, middle-class lifestyle filled with the social security and stability of secondary and tertiary-sector jobs, like manufacturing, tourism, or information technology (IT) services (Menon 2023).

After building his *pucca* house, Beherchand thought he was finally able to portray himself as a middle-class citizen of modern India. However, he had exhausted the resources needed to complete construction and his initial enthusiasm for a *pucca* house had slowly given way to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. While he now had a house built with permanent *pucca* materials that he thought would last a lifetime, the high costs of procuring these materials had left him with an incomplete *pucca* house. In other words, while he chased the dream of a permanent *pucca* house, which would showcase his middle-class status, he instead got a *pucca* house in a permanent state of incompleteness. Consequently, his quest for middle-class status had also been left incomplete and fractured. Triggered by these observations, I ask what kinds of temporalities and futures are being conjured by India's incomplete concrete infrastructures, by whom, and to what effect?

Since India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, there has been a rapid transformation in house construction materials from locally sourced, natural *kuccha* materials like mud, bamboo, and wood to market procured, industrial *pucca* materials like concrete, steel, and glass. The scale of this transformation is exemplified by the fact that, today, India is the world's largest producer and consumer of cement after China. Ninety-eight percent of its domestic cement market is monopolized by a few transnational companies, including the Switzerland-based Holcim group, and the Indian multinational giants Ultratech Cement and Adani Cement (Sharma 2017). Moreover, the country is expected to add another 400 million new urban residents by 2050 (UN Population Division 2018) for whom it is projected that an additional 9000 million square feet of concrete houses, buildings, and infrastructures will be constructed each year until then (Sankhe et al. 2010). In addition to the globalization of India's construction materials market, there has also been a flurry of state-led development programs, like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)—the Government of India's flagship affordable housing scheme, which has doled out subsidies



Figure 22.3. Incomplete *pucca* houses in India. Photo credit: Atikh Rashid, *The Indian Express*.

to socially and economically “backward” communities living in *kuccha* houses for building new *pucca* ones.

This transformation from *kuccha* to *pucca* houses has not been smooth. A cursory glance at any of India’s rapidly urbanizing small towns and peri-urban regions will reveal a skyline littered with partially built *pucca* houses with rebar sticking out into the air, promising a future of economic growth, prosperity, and upward mobility (see fig. 22.3). Official figures indicate that out of the 6.7 million *pucca* houses that were sanctioned for construction by the PMAY scheme since 2016, more than 5 million are either unfinished or have shown no signs of construction activity (Rashid 2020). Faced with bureaucratic delays in the release of earmarked subsidies, coupled with the meagre financial savings of first-time homeowners, most of whom have precarious and irregular jobs in rural India, many residents, like Beherchand, have come to repent their decision to build *pucca* houses.

Scholars have argued that infrastructures are in a state of constant temporal flux. They are always in the process of being made or, in other words, they are forever in the making (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). This fluctuating temporality of infrastructure is witnessed in Beherchand’s case as well. While

he started building his *pucca* house with aspirations of being a modern, middle-class citizen, he soon ran out of financial resources to complete his house. Now he plans to finish his house construction incrementally as and when he gathers additional funds to procure cement bags and other materials, as is often the case in many parts of the world (Simone 2020). But while the proposition that infrastructures are always incomplete might be theoretically compelling, stopping analysis at this point elides the important political work being done by infrastructure's incompleteness.

An analytical focus on the incompleteness of infrastructures can highlight the agency of marginalized communities to reshape their materially deprived surroundings and address their future aspirations. It can foreground new "improvisations and adjustments" (Amin and Thrift 2017) that marginalized communities practice in response to fractured infrastructures. However, it can also shed light on the ways in which incomplete infrastructures inhibit the agency of these communities by creating new, disempowering subjectivities that discipline them to follow specific political-economic agendas. And it can also point to how incomplete infrastructures are mobilized by the state to govern the futures of marginalized and oppressed communities.

In recent years, the paradigm of "inclusive growth" has emerged as a new way through which those in power manage those populations they deem surplus. By using similar discourses, state and corporate elites harness the aspirations of marginalized communities of partaking in India's growth narrative to make visible and monetize their own agendas (Roy 2016). Inclusive growth, then, becomes a key strategy to create new frontiers of capital expansion, and in Beherchand's case, these frontiers are literally the materials of his house. While residents in India's rapidly urbanizing small towns and peri-urban regions might be free to determine their economic futures, the widespread concretization or "*puccafication*" of their houses subverts their agency by converting them into neoliberal subjects whose everyday lives become dependent on price fluc-

tuations and volatilities in the markets for global cement and construction materials. The construction of *pucca* houses also extends the biopolitical authority of the state into remote places like Kandbari village where until recently, one did not need the government's permission to dig up earth and build mud houses on their property. Through the deployment of state-led concrete housing programs like the PMAY, basic necessities like shelter and housing become new technologies of government which are used to control the lives of the rural poor and the marginalized.

As an embodiment of progress and modernity, *pucca* materials like concrete allow marginalized communities to partake in India's growth narrative, both materially and symbolically. But while India's economy has consistently clocked more than six percent annual GDP growth rates since the 1990s, it has only created two percent growth in formal sector jobs during the same period (Ahsan et al. 2008). This stark imbalance between rapid economic growth and almost stagnant formal sector job creation has meant that people, like Beherchand, who are routinely employed in informal and casual work, do not have the financial means to concretize their middle-class aspirations. Such aspirations remain fractured and incomplete, bending like rebar in the breezes of economic vulnerability.

The case of Beherchand's incomplete *pucca* house highlights the politics of futurity. It sheds light on the processes through which the future is always constructed as something that is better than the past, something that is desirable and must be aspired to by marginalized communities the world over. It reveals the actors and institutions, like governments and transnational cement corporations, who create these singular, dominant representations of the future and who thus profit and gain power from the same. The case of Beherchand's incomplete *pucca* house also points to the fact that the materiality of infrastructures, in this case concrete, is important for determining the degree to which this desirable and aspiration future is attainable for oppressed communities in the world.

Works Cited

- Ahsan, Ahmad, Ashish Narain, Ijaz Nabi, Sadiq Ahmed, Michael Carter, Fayez Omar, Kapil Kapoor, and Dipak Dagupta. 2008. *India's Employment Challenge: Creating Jobs, Helping Workers*. Report No. 35772-IN. Poverty Reduction and Economic Management, South Asia, World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/936421468044366290/india-the-employment-challenge-creating-jobs-helping-workers>.
- Amin, Ash, and Nigel Thrift. 2017. *Seeing Like a City*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Anand, Nikhil, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, eds. 2018. *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Menon, Siddharth. 2023. "Class, Caste, Gender, and the Materiality of Cement Houses in India." *Antipode* 55, no. 2: 574–98. DOI: 10.1111/anti.12898.
- Rashid, Atikh. 2020. "Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Subsidy Delayed, Thousands of Beneficiaries Forced to Live in Shanties or Half-Finished Houses." *The Indian Express*, October 10. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/as-they-wait-for-delayed-pmay-subsidy-thousands-of-beneficiaries-forced-to-live-in-shanties-or-half-finished-houses-6718581/>.
- Roy, Ananya. 2016. "When Is Asia?" *The Professional Geographer* 68, no. 2: 313–21. DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2015.1099183.
- Sankhe, Shirish, Ireena Vittal, Richard Dobbs, Ajit Mohan, Ankur Gulati, Jonathan Ablett, Shishir Gupta et al. 2010. "India's Urban Awakening: Building Inclusive Cities, Sustaining Urban Growth." *McKinsey Global Institute*, April 1. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/urbanization/urban-awakening-in-india>.
- Sharma, Reeta. 2017. *Cement Industry Trends Report*. New Delhi: The Energy and Resources Institute. <https://www.teriin.org/library/files/Cement-Industry-Trends-Report2017.pdf>.

- Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2020. "Cities of the Global South."
Annual Review of Sociology 46: 603–22. DOI: 10.1146/
annurev-soc-121919-054602.
- UN Population Division. 2018. *The World's Cities in 2018: Data
Booklet*. ST/ESA/SER.A/417. New York: United Nations.
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3799524?v=pdf>.