Designing an Illusion of India's Future Superpowerdom: Of the Rise of Neo-Aristocracy, Hindutva and Philanthrocapitalism

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Designing an Illusion of India's Future Superpowerdom: Of the Rise of Neo-Aristocracy, Hindutva and Philanthrocapitalism

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The article dissects current utopian visions of future Indian superpowerdom and traces them to underlying convergences between right wing political Hindu nationalism and philanthrocapitalism. By looking at how utopian visions are materialized in the elitist aesthetics of 'royal chic' parading on New Delhi's fashion ramps and in the aesthetics of hypermodern smart cities of the future, the article explores the aesthetic and affective convergence of an imagined economy and (re-)invented traditions. In the problematic terrain of philanthrocapitalism, the 'factish' of GDP and the doxa of Indianness have come to form the core of current populist myths. In so doing they produce an illusion of future India that nobody really believes in, yet structures reality and is passionately embraced by many. The article suggests that the problem with such utopian myths is not that they are myths, but rather it is the direction they are pushing in and their consequences which require questioning. The article provides preliminary analysis of, and answers around, this problematic of resonant versus dissonant futures and their imaginaries.

Philanthrocapitalism and the New Benevolent Neo-Aristocracy

'Greed is good, in fact, it is a virtue, only the superrich can save the world!', thus spoke Ravan[1], a Delhi-based businessman and self-proclaimed philanthropist. In an attempt to exterminate or co-opt competing views, this belief is chanted like a mantra within transnational business circles. It spreads like a virus. Recently, this 'benevolent and inherently good' *philanthrocapitalism* (Bishop and Green 2008) has infected the Indian business and political elite. I recall reading a newspaper article in *The Hindu* in 2008 in which the terribly 'greedy' Indian billionaires were identified as the root cause of all socioeconomic evil in India (with a few notable exceptions such as the Tatas[2]). In 2012, during additional fieldwork, the same newspaper enthusiastically reported on *Forbes India Philanthropy Awards*. The greedy were swiftly turned into the noble and benevolent national heroes and the magic key to India's shining future as a global economic superpower. Around that time, the same business elite also turned, with a newfound passion, to India's pre-colonial past, to the golden eras of heroic Rajput warriors, princes, nawabs and Mughals; and no less, to India's spiritual heritage, scriptures and teachings. They turned to the past primarily in order to design, in a distinctly *ornamentalist* fashion (Cannadine 2002)[3], India's glorious future and themselves as its self-proclaimed neo-aristocracy. India's elite fashion designers turned their backs to the 'West' and began instead catering to the desires of distinction and national pride among the Indian elite. Fashion ramps in New Delhi and Mumbai turned into stages for retro-futuristic fairy tale worlds of India's grandeur, with models parading in heavily embroidered and multi-layered neo-aristocratic robes, a fusion of India's crafts, creative design and *Swarovski* crystals. The crystals were there only to add a touch of western luxury that says, as one designer put it: 'the tables have turned, we own you [the West], now *you* are a mere embellishment on our bodies, incorporated on our terms'. The rise of this utopian vision of India's shining future, materialized in the aesthetic production of these fashion designers, coincided with the rise of revamped right wing Hindu nationalism and a concomitant taste for ethical fashion. The recent victory of the right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* and its 'muscular' new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, with his campaign 'acche din aane wale hain' (good days are approaching) promising spectacular economic growth grounded in India's spiritual strength, is a testimony to the success and seductive power of this utopian vision. The revival of kingly models of Indian

1. This essay is grounded in long-term ethnographic fieldwork in north India (2008, 2010-11) during which I have followed the production and travel of traditional embroidery from Lucknow to the high end designer studios and elite clientele in New Delhi, looking at relations of power and reproduction of privilege. The quotation comes from a conversation that took place during a business event in December 2010, in *The Oberoi Rajvillas Hotel* in Jaipur.

2. The Tata family features prominently in philanthrocapitalist narratives, due to the family's involvement in the building of modern India. Ratan Tata, who turned *Tata Sons* into the world's 6th largest corporation, is not only every Indian entrepreneur's idealized hero but also one of the most celebrated philanthropists.

3. David Cannadine argues that British Empire was not exclusively about race (Orient versus Occident), but more significantly about hierarchy and its ornamentation. The empire was united through its hierarchy, which positioned the kingly and royal elite across the empire against the 'inferior' subjects.

governance (Price 1989) has become visible in current populist right wing politics and culture. A remark by Anil Ambani, the chairman of the *Reliance Group*, one of India's largest business conglomerates, calling Modi the 'king among kings' fittingly captures this emergence, situating Modi as one who will turn India into a superpower backed by the benevolent neo-aristocracy; the business elite who riding on a wave of CSR (corporate social responsibility) and philanthropy, have been supporting this king's rise to power. In what follows, I trace the underlying convergences between philanthrocapitalism and Hindu nationalism, connecting them to the utopian visions of India's rise to power as materialized in the particular aesthetic form of opulent heritage luxury set amidst the hypermodern smart cities of the near future.

Figure 1. (left) *Vogue India*, November 2011, p. 227. Photographed by Diego Fuga, styled by Deep Kailey, modelled by Jyothsna Chakravarthy. The text reads: "Rule over the stylish masses with season's reinterpretation of imperial androgyny (…) lead the way: craftsmanship at its finest. An embellished ensemble offset by diamonds and pearls creates a look fit for a king – or queen." Image © Vogue India, 2011

Figure 2. (right) The signature buildings of the future smart city of Dholera in Gujarat. Image © promotional campaign by *Dholera Property Management Services*, 2014.

Futuristic Smart Cities and Phantasmatic Economies

The illusion of India's future superpowerdom materializes not only in fashion design, but also in the actions of the architects of utopia par excellence; the planners of, and investors in, India's future smart cities for the worthy citizens, the new rich and upper middle class. Those who build these cities are expelled (Sassen 2014), from imagination, from belonging to the nation, and from state responsibilities. The newly elected right wing government has already allotted start-up money for 100 smart cities of the future in its budget, envisioned along the lines of the yet non-existent utopian city of *Dholera* planned in Gujarat. A city resembling Shanghai, double the size of Mumbai, running on renewable energy, classified as a 'special investment region', no crowds, pollution or excessive noise, and an international airport for this new age to secure smooth penetration of international capital. This 'megalomaniac' construction project promises to deliver the magical 9% rate of growth, or so its political and corporate ideologues claim. Today, there is only land with a bunch of skyscrapers under construction close to the coastline that is being eaten up by the rising sea at the rate of 1cm a day. This land is populated by roughly 40 000 largely poor farmers, the future dispossessed slum dwellers, typical of such construction projects (Roy 2014). They protest in vain. Instead of providing clean water, health care and social services within the already existing cities, the state, much like the business people, is determined to capitalize on phantasmatic virtualities and promises. During the election campaign, merely due to the anticipation of Modi's victory with his promise of further pro-business reforms, the stock of *Reliance*

Industries has gained 20% even before he was really elected, while *Adani Enterprises*, owned by the billionaire and devoted supporter of Modi, Gautam Adani, jumped 60% from April to May 2014. This is the power of carefully designed and staged illusion.

Utopia as Illusion without Owners

The idea of India's inevitable future superpowerdom is repetitively recited, acted out and materialized, and yet it is never clear who and if anyone really believes in it. None of the prominent business clientele of India's renowned fashion designers, with whom I engaged in discussions on the topic, really believed in this myth. They all *knew* that the reality looks radically different, and so would the future, and yet they still acted as if they didn't know, investing their own capital in real estate projects destined to never look like their promotional images. However, they derived great *pleasure* and *pride* from their acts of belief in India's greatness and power. Therefore, we could identify this illusion, as an 'illusion without owners', to use Robert Pfaller's concept (Pfaller 2014b). An illusion that no one really believes in yet is no less powerful and no less capable of structuring reality for it. Even popular writers of non-fiction and economic ideologues regularly perpetuate this shared illusion, despite starting with a sober summing up of the pervasive ills of Indian society. First they talk of poverty, ecologic crisis, caste discrimination, communal violence, lack of quality education, dysfunctional health care system, but then they quickly move on to a discussion of the booming IT industry, the emergence of billionaires, scientists and professionals, and so on (e.g. Kamdar 2007, Das 2000). As Pfaller points out, "not every utopia must then exist in the form of a 'confession' - with convinced followers who know what they believe in or wish for. Instead, a utopia can also be present as an 'illusion of the other,' in the form of an 'as though' materialized in diverse practices and objects, which no one has to believe in consciously or with conviction. *Like the tricks at magic shows or politeness, such utopias could also exist as fictions held by groups or even entire societies, without any individual ever coming into question as the owner of such an illusion*" (Pfaller 2014: 46, emphasis mine). The utopian visions of India's future greatness consist precisely of such a shared illusion that has, at its heart, a convergence of imagined economy and of (re-)invented tradition. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (Tripathi 2010, Tripathi 2011, Tripathi 2013), the fastest selling book series in the history of Indian publishing is a case in point. Written by a marketing guru, it tapped directly into the desire for national pride. Most of my elite interlocutors were proudly displaying their *Shiva Trilogies* in their book shelves, while openly admitting that they never read the books. Their pleasure derived from the reproduction of the shared illusion of India's greatness.

Imagined Economy and the Doxa of Indianness

In his famous work on imagined communities, Benedict Anderson surprisingly ignored the significance of the economy in the construction of national narratives (Anderson 1990). Yet, in the Indian context, as Satish Deshpande has argued, the economy is the primary source of raw material for the nationalist imagination (Deshpande 1993). This creates an opening for the smooth merger of the ideologies of Hindutva and neoliberalism, and recently philanthrocapitalism. During the 2014 elections, the magical rate of growth equated with 'development' became the ultimate emblem of Brand India's future glory (Crane 1999). Economic growth has become an unexamined virtue and consumption a national imperative. GDP rate is India's national 'factish' - a mixture of a *fact* – calculated by rigorous scientific methods, and *fetish* – made effective by collective belief (Latour 2010) or by shared illusion. The *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977) of Indianness, understood as a particular spiritual quality that distinguishes Indians from the rest of the world, works remarkably well when combined with this *factish*. Together, the factish of GDP and the *doxa* of Indianness form the core of a powerful populist myth that mobilized the *affects* of millions during these elections. Spinoza insisted that to exist is to desire, that we are beings driven by our desires, activated in relentless pursuit of them. The mobilization of affects which redirect our desires and our desire to act, is the goal of all operations of power – from politics to advertising. As Frédéric Lordon in his Spinozist critique of political economy remarks, "to induce an aligned desire is the perennial goal

(…) of all the institutions of capture" (Lordon 2014: 98). Political myths and utopian visions that recycle powerful symbolism aim at affecting us and making us act in alignment with the master-desire, here the master-desire of BJP. The mobilization of *moral sentiments* that induces joyful affects and brings pleasure to their devoted adherents, is significant here.

Figure 3 From the 'Azrak' Collection by JJ Valaya inspired by the Ottoman Empire, presented at the Grand Finale of *Wills Lifestyle Fashion Week* in 2012. Notice the staged craftspeople positioned as the subject of the neo-aristocratic lady. Image © Akanksha Singhal, 2012.

Resonances between Hindutva and Philanthrocapitalism

In his article from 2006, Shankar Gopalakrishnan (Gopalakrishnan 2006) pointed towards resonances between Hindutva and neoliberalism, resonances that have become even more acute today. Firstly, both ideologies reduce social processes to individual choices or individual moralities, thus doing away with any conception of social structures and power relations. Secondly, both ideologies divide societies into 'internal' and 'external' realms, where "the actual existence of social divisions is then explained by identifying certain division as *the* boundaries of 'society' itself. Outside those boundaries lie 'external' entities, which produce 'disharmony' within society (…) those 'outside' must be 'educated' into the 'understanding' necessary for social functioning, or, if this is impossible, destroyed" (Gopalakrishnan 2006: 2805, emphasis mine). Following this logic, in the 'India shining' (2004) and 'acche din aane wale hain' (2014) political campaigns, where neoliberalism most clearly overlapped with Hindu nationalism, "those without 'shining' lives were simply not Indian" (Gopalakrishnan 2006: 2808) and were expelled from 'Brand India' together with Naxalites, poor Muslims and slum dwellers. Thirdly, both ideologies share a rhetoric of *transformation* through their main ideological principle – either *market* or *dharma* (Gopalakrishnan 2006). *Dharma* here provides neoliberalism with the ideological moral high, even promising to transform India into a global power capable of saving the world from 'civilizational' crisis. The re-embedding of morality or *dharma* into the market (Banerjee 2008) through CSR, ethical business practices and philanthropy, translates into increased power and authority of the business elite. Consumerism is turned into the main form of 'political' action and market into the ground for benevolent relations and the showcase for humanitarian compassion. This destroys any potential for non-market politics while feeding the world with a fairy tale story that "one can celebrate a culture of global capitalism while sympathizing with its victims" (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009: 979). Moreover, this compassion often translates into oppression on the ground. Here, we might remind ourselves that dependence on benevolent patrons is at the core of untouchability. Any Indianist is familiar with the story of the village

untouchable banned from using the local well, forced to wait until a benevolent Brahmin pours water in his hands. It is benevolence that *depends* on constant production of dependence and expulsion. The popularity of philanthrocapitalism among the elite can be read as a continuation of traditional structures of inequality. Even more troubling is the aim of billionaire philanthropists to replace the state, increasingly portrayed by corporate lobby as incompetent, overtly bureaucratic, the exact opposite of a dynamic and effective corporation. The state is rendered 'incompetent' and infantilized. And here come the wealthy philanthropists to the rescue! This logic of superior corporate professionalism is behind Aditya Birla's programmes run for the Indian government, a government keen to outsource its duties to private foundations. The new BJP government plans to strengthen the role of philanthropy and CSR, insisting that only the superrich can turn the country into a superpower. Philanthropists have become India's new heroes, portrayed as committed to nation building and as the solution to all social evils. They relieve the state of its responsibility (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009), take on roles previously reserved to government, and insert themselves into governance. In the process, governance becomes depoliticized and the negative impacts of the market that create the 'need' for philanthropy in the first place made invisible (Nickel and Eikenberry 2010). The goal should be the abolition of this need but the result is its perpetuation, even deliberate creation.

Royal Chic and the Aesthetics of Utopias

The last decade has seen not only a boom of *royal chic* (Kuldova 2013a, Kuldova 2013b) but also of ethical fashion. The 'case' of fashion reveals the underlying logic of Indian philanthrocapitalism at large. The value of the Indian ornamentalist fashion and heritage luxury does not only reside, as typical of design today, in the *immaterial* value produced by the artist-designer, but also, undeniably, in the labour of hundreds of largely impoverished craftspeople. The value lies as much in the actual *material* value of embroideries and embellishments and the laborious process of their making. Craftspeople are indispensable for two reasons. Firstly, in their idealized and abstract form, they stand for Indian heritage and past, materializing the *doxa* of Indianness. Secondly, their impoverishment is key to the construction of an image of 'ethical and socially responsible business' (as such, impoverishment is precisely the condition that must be perpetuated), with its proclaimed goal of development and empowerment. This, in turn, transforms the designer and, ultimately, the elite consumer too, not only into a *benevolent patron* imagined along the lines of the royal patrons of arts and crafts of the bygone era, but also into the protector of tradition and a guarantor of its continuation. Philanthrocapitalism's success in India is predicated upon such hierarchical and elitist sentiment. Neo-aristocratic 'ethical' fashion embodies the power of the elite *to subject*, to create dependency and perpetuate poverty and status quo. Philanthropy and ethical consumption, as a distinctly elitist pastime, revolves around theatrical bestowals of benevolence. It is all about the power to subject and the visible display of inequality. Opening paragraphs of a recent volume entitled *Revealing Indian Philanthropy* (Cantegreil et al. 2013) testify to this by tracing the history of philanthropy in India back to rulers such as the emperor Ashoka, rendered here as 'the philanthropic administrator', and placing these heroic rulers next to contemporary philanthropists. Indian philanthrocapitalism and craving for ethical ornamentalist fashion reveals a continuation of the feudal logic of benevolent aristocracy in a transforming world, except that the business neo-aristocracy now resides in gated communities, and in future maybe in 'smart gated enclaves', in luxury spaces of peace amidst the destitution on which it depends.

Where does this Utopian Myth Push Us?

Opulent and ornamentalist royal chic and utopian construction projects of future smart cities, point to the fundamentally aesthetic nature of utopias (Schulte-Sasse and Schulte-Sasse 1991). Aesthetics provides the seductive form to mythical narratives, a concrete and yet fairy tale vision of the future. Such myths are not only able to move the affects of the members of the body politic, but also to push these affects in a desired direction (Citton 2010). It is no coincidence that the media was speaking of the 'Modi

wave' of hope and joy; the slogan *acche din aane wale hain* spread like a *contagion* and, for a moment, even those who in reality are excluded from 'brand India' felt they could be a part of it, if only they cast the right vote. The mobilization of hope and joy is the most powerful tool available to populist politics and aesthetics plays an indispensable role here. This is how the elite manage to align the desire of the masses with their master-desire (Lordon 2014), and convince them to vote against their own interests, for a strong authoritarian leader and the extension of corporate interest. The problem with populist myths and the cultivation of certain illusions is not that they are myths; after all, we derive a great deal of pleasure and a sense of orientation from these myths. Revealing myths as simplistic or unrealistic does not help, since it does not rob them of their *effectivity*. Myths, ideologies and illusions are resistant to knowledge. We cultivate them even when we know better. The important question is here: towards what kind of future is this myth pushing us? The problem with the Indian utopian myth centred on the magical rate of growth, Hindu spirit and benevolent billionaires, is not that it is a myth, but that it is a *bad* myth (Citton 2010). It leads not only to environmental destruction but also, and more importantly, to the expulsion of millions of undesirables into further poverty, beyond the internal border of (good) 'society' itself, thus transforming them from citizens into an internal security threat.

When there is no longer any violence, there is no need for help,
Therefore you should not demand help, but abolish violence.
Help and violence form a whole,
And the whole has to be changed.
(Brecht 1967: 599).

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