As Gurgaon expands horizontally and vertically, it continues to transition from farms to urban villages to a concrete maze. This photographic project documents the growth of Gurgaon a city recently developed near India's capital, Delhi. It is a booming financial and industrial center, home to most Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and has third highest per-capita income in India. As its advocates often like to point out, Delhi's booming neighbor has 1,100 high-rises, at least 30 malls and thousands of small and big industries. On the other hand, as its detractors unfailingly like to note, the dust bowl's population has grown two and a half fold, it has 12-hour power blackouts, and its groundwater would probably not last beyond this decade. Gurgaon's transformation began sometime around 1996, with the advent of Genpact, then a business unit of General Electric. Other multinational companies followed it slowly thereafter. It helped that the city was a few kilometers away from Delhi. Two decades on, Gurgaon is already "on its deathbed." From 0.8 million in 2001, the city is expected to reach a population of 6.9 million in 2031. It is speckled with glass buildings with curtain walls, and swish apartment blocks with Greco-Roman influences, but there is little water or power for them. These numbers alone don't capture the lived reality of Gurgaon, though. The skyline that its older residents were accustomed to has completely disappeared. And yet on the periphery, one sees the "Unfinished City" growing. The landscapes and flora shouting; their sentiments brutalized by evictions and concrete. Slaughtered farms now seem witness to monstrosity with desolate faces and fading memories. Set in 2014 the project explores the ephemerality of Gurgaon's glamor and defective town planning. Families had been displaced, laborers' children were growing up on heaps of cement, and farmlands had turned into things of memories.

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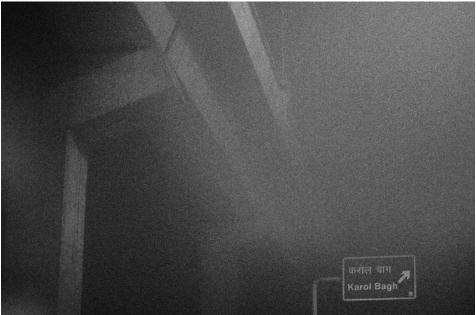
Sarth Khare

Gurugram exists today as a chaotic assemblage of plush urbanity, unstirred rural networks, and indefinite "unfinished" edges. The current city is a result of multiple factors. The three primary ones are as follows: "lifting of restrictions on the land-acquisition process and the unusual lack of local government," the geographical advantage of its closeness to the International Airport and New Delhi, and the liberal reforms in the national policies of India that led to globalization and the rapid urbanization of the country (Rajagopalan & Tabarrok, 2014; Cowan, 2015).

Until the late 1980s, Gurugram, or Gurgaon as it was earlier known, was an agricultural wasteland and was owned by the state government or by wealthy farming families (Khare, 2016; Kapur, 2020). Initial lack of any municipal control led to the Chief Minister of Haryana having a "key veto power in allowing land conversion" of the agrarian land to residential and commercial purposes. He became the "main power center granting licenses to private land developers" (Rajagopalan & Tabarrok, 2014). The private real estate companies like DLF jumped on the opportunity and played a vital role in inviting multinational companies, such as General Electric, and helping them set up their offices in Gurugram (Kumar, 2014). Riding the wave of the recently-adopted liberalization policies that led to the flow of foreign capital in India, Gurugram provided the private infrastructure to meet the spatial and residential needs of these companies. The real estate firms kept acquiring subsequent land parcels as they developed glass buildings with curtain walls and apartment blocks with Greco-Roman influences (Kumar & Misra, 2012). This piece by piece acquisition of an urban space "without a master plan" led to a fragmented development with independent, self-sustaining gated colonies and without a robust municipal infrastructure for water or power (Kapur, 2020).

Gurugram gave new opportunities to young, middle-class workers in the tech industry. The prosperous and educated migrated from around India, and the world moved in to form a new core of elite residential and commercial spaces to fulfill the demand of specialized labor necessitated by the multinational corporations. And to support these employees, the private sector also created the country's largest malls, golf courses, and apartment complexes (Rajagopalan & Tabarrok, 2014).
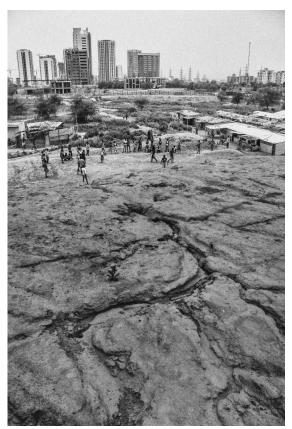
Gurugram's traditionally agrarian land, which was passed down through generations, became the target of potential use by the government for large-scale private development. The traditionally established ecosystem of agriculture, small/micro industries, and community economies was suddenly uprooted as the landscape transformed into this seemingly world-class metropolis with world-class amenities.

Local Jat and Yadav families, who were already "both politically and socially dominant" emerged as a nouveau riche landlords through deals that took place in clandestine secondary markets with under-invoicing, tax evasion, and black market cash transactions (Cowan, 2015; Varghese, 2009; *Times of India*, 2019). These original inhabitants of the land continued to stay in their ancestral villages, while their villages started getting surrounded by high-rises. The residential "Lal Dora" land of the villages remained untouched by the infrastructure boost from which the new private townships were benefiting. With time these spaces, once surrounded by large, open, agrarian lands, started transforming into ghettos enclosed within a robust metropolitan life.

A life with high-rises, malls, and factories which thrived on the foundations of the cheap labor and daily services found in these urban villages. Demand for low end support services such as security guards, sales, marketing, domestic helpers, etc. drew hordes of unemployed youth and adults from different parts of India. They descended on the periphery of glitzy Gurgaon. To encash their arrival, the informal "Lal Dora" lands grew anarchically "to undertake rapid territorial commodification of the city" into dense, dingy urban villages, marred by unregulated, precarious construction, narrow lanes, and a lack of municipal services (Cowan, 2015). Tenants here are denied legal rights and are subjugated by socio-spatial hierarchy of casteist and gender prejudices, leading to a sense of "invisibility in their neighborhood" (Cowan, 2015).

Beyond this heterogeneous patchwork of urban villages and private development, there lies a layer of dystopic poverty in the unorganized and hidden slums of Gurugram. Here live the thousands of others swarming from the hinterlands of Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh as migrant laborers and construction workers. They are generally uneducated, unskilled, and come from the bottom end of the socio-economic pyramid of caste and income (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017). They can't even afford the claustrophobic rental housing of Lal Dora Villages and are forced to spend their lives in makeshift, inhospitable, hot and humid, unventilated temporary sheds. Substandard shelters are devoid of even basic requirements of enclosed toilets, drinking water, reasonable leg and headspace, and are also vulnerable to the vagaries of weather. There hang shadows of fire hazards and water-borne diseases such as dysentery, cholera, and typhoid (Raghav & Joshi, 2019).

Shockingly, even this supposedly lowest segment of inhabitants is further fragmented by discriminations of caste and gender. Socially lower communities of Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Muslims are pushed farther to the margins of the periphery itself, both spatially and in terms of living conditions (Bird & Deshingkar, 2009). The women here face greater hostility: lack of privacy or enclosed hygienic bathrooms, lower wages, harassment – including sexual harassment – from menfolk, landlords, etc (Sundari, 2005).

The lives of both types of migrants, living in dingy urban villages or exposed temporary tin-sheds, undergo a traumatic transformation. Their bodily practices and movements, food, and sleep patterns, contrasting with their original agrarian lifestyles, become severely constrained and dictated by their inhospitable, even inhumane, living conditions and low-paid, intermittent, and demanding jobs. In the construction industry, work shifts, usually extending to 10-12 hours a day without any overtime allowance, are aggravated by adverse work environments and lackadaisical implementation of labor laws (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017). The city for them becomes a relational location, as much a space of emergence and growth as it is of vulnerability (Bhan, 2019). These workers seem to be barely living in the city, contained in their small sphere with no time and space for an engagement with the glitzy "millennium city" and its facilities (*Times of India*, 2019). While Gurugram cannot move without these workers, they rarely are a policy focus in the city (Kapur, 2020).

Gurgaon is an anachronistic and puzzling patchwork of high socio-economic segmentation. It embodies a whole microcosm, embodying features of both the worlds – core and periphery – all at once, in one place. That is why I call it an "Unfinished City," churning and evolving, encapsulating in the process all the tensions – socio-economic and political.
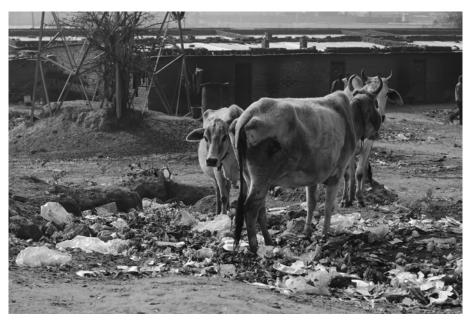
In an attempt to understand the "Image of the City," I made my way to the "edges" of Gurgaon (Lynch, 1960). As an architect educated in New Delhi with theories of the global North, Gurgaon perplexed me. Unlike the textbook theories, Gurgaon appeared like a product of pasting images from the north into the base of Indian ingenuity and adaptability. It felt like "a microcosm of Indian dynamism and dysfunction" (Yardley, 2011).

Here, beyond the Gurugram already built, on the literal peripheries of Gurugram, a similar story of expansion is waiting to happen. The groundwork is set and the farmlands have been sold. I photographed stark changes in the physical landscape which alter the lives of people — hidden slums as temporary housing for construction workers, overpowering urbanism looming at a distance, ubiquitous fields of shining swaying wheat, paddy sunny mustard and sunflower soon to be evaporated slowly into a dystopian dark gray skyline. These photographs are an effort to look at Gurgaon from the ground, to look through the layered periphery, often chided as temporary disarray, from within the core.

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