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# Recycling Class

## The Contradictions of Inclusion in Urban Sustainability

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## Introduction: Situating Sustainability in Bengaluru's Discards

*"Stop! Stop stealing the milk packets!"* shouted Kranthi, a thirty-eight-year-old tech executive at a multinational company in Bengaluru, India. She was screaming at three *pourakarmikas* (sanitation workers) who were hastily chucking high-value recyclables from a moving truck onto the tin roof of a scrap shop. I was in Kranthi's car on a Sunday morning in November 2012 as we followed a truck collecting recyclables from apartment complexes in her neighborhood. These weekly collection trips were the centerpiece of the zero-waste initiative that Kranthi had launched in KK Nagar, a residential neighborhood that emerged in the 2000s alongside a tech-industrial park in Bengaluru's southwest periphery.<sup>1</sup> Kranthi was upset because she saw the actions of the *pourakarmikas* as a betrayal of the initiative's ideals—to keep recyclables out of landfills by diverting them to "legitimate" value chains like the Wealth Out of Waste program run by ITC (formerly known as the Indian Tobacco Corporation).<sup>2</sup> Instead, the workers were subverting her green visions by claiming the value of the waste for themselves and doing what they had long done—selling recyclables to scrap dealers in the informal economy to supplement their meager pay.

"I wanted to invest some of my time and energy to improve the long-term health and sustainability of my community," Kranthi told me when I asked her why she had started this effort. Frustrated seeing garbage on her street day after day, she impugned the municipality and the waste contractor. "They kept not collecting garbage regularly. . . . I am quite sure he is corrupt." But when an activist from a citywide advocacy group made a presentation at her workplace about community-based waste management programs, she decided to take matters into her own hands. With the help of three retired men, Kranthi recruited two hundred households, asking them

to segregate their waste into three categories: dry, wet, and sanitary waste. Wet waste was collected daily by the private company contracted by the municipality to collect waste in this area. The same workers collected dry waste once a week, transporting it to a waste-sorting center (a shed with no electricity), where it was weighed and sold to ITC for a bulk rate of 2 rupees (.03 USD) per kilogram.

During these weekly trips, Kranthi and her band of eager retirees followed the *pourakarmikas* to monitor how well KK Nagar residents were adapting their behaviors. At each of our stops, the workers, two women and one man, went through bins pulling out paper, plastic, and other recyclable materials. Kranthi asked them to put on gloves, but the thin latex tore in contact with coarse waste. One woman wore a jacket issued as a uniform by the contractor. Otherwise, there was no personal protective equipment in sight. The *pourakarmikas* bent and knelt, sorting on the floor, while we stood staring. Although the apartment complex residents were supposed to have pre-sorted the waste, segregation was imperfect. When we found rotting flowers and diapers in a bin marked dry waste, Kranthi immediately admonished the apartment-level project leader for the misstep. The workers moved the diaper to the correct bin. Soon, after visiting eight apartment complexes, we headed toward the sorting center, following the open-backed truck with bags of recyclable material. We lost sight of the truck, which appeared to take a turn into a side lane. Kranthi caught up, and as we came closer, we saw that the truck had stopped next to a scrap shop, and the *pourakarmikas* were rapidly throwing out the highest-value recyclables. Out went the cardboard boxes and the milk packets. Once the workers realized we had caught up with them, they stopped and quickly drove on.

At the sorting center, Kranthi confronted the workers about what happened. They sidestepped her censure with half-hearted nods, voicing their frustrations to their boss in Kannada: “We would get so much more money if we sold the *maal* [valuable materials] to the scrap shop than just giving everything to ITC for 2 rupees. It is stupid to give it away so cheap.”<sup>3</sup> “Shut up,” shouted their supervisor. Kranthi tried to placate them: “After all, we give you some of the money from the sale to ITC, and breakfast too.” The *pourakarmikas* were unhappy with the scrutiny. Even if the money accrued by selling recyclables to ITC was ultimately distributed to the workers (after deducting unspecified “operating costs”), they resented losing control over the process. The middle-class volunteers, in contrast, had no visible

financial motives and did not see the need to sell the recyclables for a higher price. Their priorities were clean streets and a clean ecological conscience. And they wanted to get back home to hot lunches, with an afterglow of a morning's worth of civic duty under their belt.

This conflict captures a key tension in urban environmentalisms in Bengaluru, India. On the one hand, well-meaning environmentalists like Kranthi desire clean and green cities, which they hope to achieve through behavior change, infrastructural upgrades, and market mechanisms. Some work hard in their homes and neighborhoods to execute community-based environmental solutions. But their attempts at achieving sustainable cities requires the labor of waste workers, who they retain in class- and caste-subjugated roles. Their zero-waste schemes also threaten long-standing circuits of resource recovery tied to informal livelihoods and economies. They do not readily recognize sanitation workers, waste pickers, and scrap dealers as legitimate environmental or economic actors, excluding them from full participation in urban environmental politics.

But within this story of oppression repackaged with a green sheen are potential seeds of change. Metabolic dependencies on labor to enact zero-waste systems had opened new avenues for environmental claim-making by certain sectors of the urban poor in Bengaluru. Indeed, a few weeks before my visit to KK Nagar, I was in the Karnataka High Court. In a crowded courtroom, two judges were presiding over a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by a group of housewives, retirees, and some nongovernmental organizations affiliated with a network called the Clean and Green Forum (TCGF),<sup>4</sup> accusing the Bengaluru municipal authority of violating their constitutional right to life by failing to manage Bengaluru's waste.<sup>5</sup> TCGF members went to the courts after several years of neighborhood-level advocacy promoting "zero-waste" practices.

Alongside TCGF in the courtroom were representatives from Parisara Tanda, a newly formed organization advocating for the rights of informal waste pickers—individuals, families, and communities who make a living by collecting, sorting, and diverting recyclable materials (Dias 2016). Waste pickers are "other low carbon protagonists" (Cohen 2017) who participate in the environmental management of cities and the maintenance of global environmental health, but on embattled terms. Since 2011, Parisara Tanda has worked to gain recognition and inclusion for waste pickers in Bengaluru, helping them access social services and economic opportunities in

emerging recycling systems. Parisara Tanda's organizing strategy emphasizes building alliances with middle-class environmentalists: "Our initial goal was to get them [middle classes] comfortable with the idea of including informal sector and waste pickers. If not, they will give the contracts to corporates. I have seen it everywhere; when middle class get involved in waste, waste pickers get wiped out," explained one of the organizations' founders in a 2012 interview. Leveraging the green talk of its middle-class partners, Parisara Tanda reframed informal waste workers as the city's "silent environmentalists" and "robust entrepreneurs," who recovered resources, revalorized discards, and accumulated ecological knowledge in the shadows.

The PIL was well-timed. In August 2012, Bengaluru was plunged into a garbage crisis when *pourakarmikas* across the city went on strike protesting unpaid wages and poor working conditions. Compounding matters, the residents of Mandur and Mavallipura, two peripheral villages that received Bengaluru's discards, constructed blockades to stop garbage trucks from dumping waste.<sup>6</sup> Years of concerted organizing by the Dalit Sangarsh Samithi had finally brought media attention to the plight of the communities living next to these dumpsites. With the dumps closed, stinking mounds of garbage piled up on every street corner. Rats and bandicoots came out at night, frolicking in paper, plastic, and vegetable peels. English-language newspapers and 24/7 news channels declared a garbage crisis. TV journalists stood next to open dumps, portending public health disasters. A *New York Times* article titled "India's Plague, Trash, Drowns Bengaluru, Its Garden City" seemed to push the city over the edge, into straight-out panic mode.<sup>7</sup> Sensing an opportunity, a prominent environmental justice organization called the Environment Support Group filed complementary legal petitions on the rights of landfill-adjacent communities and the need for democratic, decentralized governance of waste infrastructures. Together, this coalition of middle-class environmentalists, environmental justice groups, and labor organizers demanded that the municipality mandate segregation of waste at source, build recycling and composting facilities, and institute citizen committees to oversee these operations.

It worked. Facing mounting pressure and desperate for new solutions, the judges did something very surprising. Instead of deploying police to reopen the dumps and rejecting counterproposals to set up waste-to-energy facilities, they ordered the municipal government to stop dumping waste and begin constructing a decentralized network of materials recovery centers in

Bengaluru.<sup>8</sup> Parisara Tanda also succeeded in gaining formal recognition of waste pickers when Bengaluru became one of the first municipal authorities to issue occupational identity cards to waste pickers. With support from key middle-class movement actors, Parisara Tanda had secured new economic opportunities for waste pickers to operate recycling centers and provide waste management services.

In a decade, waste pickers in Bengaluru have gone from *personae non gratae*, people to be avoided and expunged, to celebrated environmental heroes. Bengaluru is now hailed as a leader in informal sector integration and community involvement in waste management.<sup>9</sup> Several other Indian cities have issued occupational identity cards to enumerated waste pickers, and informal sector inclusion is emphasized in Narendra Modi's signature 2014 Swachh Bharat "Clean India" Mission.<sup>10</sup> Parisara Tanda's waste pickers partner with global brands like H&M and The Body Shop, have been featured in lifestyle magazines, and speak at national and global environmental summits. Sustainability and environmentalism became the terrain on which they defended their right to the city. This book tells the story of how this happened and asks what it can tell us about the potential for and pathways to *just sustainabilities* in global cities.<sup>11</sup>

A product of my decade-long engagement with Bengaluru's zero-waste movement, *Recycling Class* shows how diverse social groups adopt, contest, and modify neoliberal sustainability's emphasis on market-based solutions, behavior change, and aesthetic conflation of clean with green. Tracing the flows of both waste materials and sustainability discourses, I link an examination of middle-class (sustainable) consumption with the (environmental) labor of the working poor to offer a relational analysis of urban sustainability politics and practice. It is well past time to move beyond simplistic accounts of sustainability that frame the expanding Indian middle class as rapacious, environmentally unconscious consumers, or the urban poor in Global South cities as passive recipients of environmental injustice. In the discussions that follow, I offer an alternative perspective that instead analyzes consumers' and waste-pickers' interactions within urban waste metabolisms.

Based on ethnographic and community-based research, I demonstrate that the very presence of waste pickers in what I term *communal sustainability* challenges the existing discourse and forms of environmentalism, forcing the middle classes and the state to consider livelihood, occupational health, and social welfare as crucial elements of sustainability transitions.

While waste-picker organizations have used the waste and urban sustainability agenda to create new avenues for economic inclusion and political negotiation, the same agenda also reproduces unequal distributions of risk and responsibility. Drawing on feminist geography and urban political ecology, I argue that achieving just and ecologically safe cities ultimately requires resisting the seduction of neoliberal logics of growth, efficiency, and “clean and green” aesthetics to reclaim the city from the detritus of a consumerist and casteist society.

### **World-Class Cities Are Wasteful Cities**

This book is set in Bengaluru, arguably India’s most cosmopolitan city. A significant proportion of Bengaluru’s ten million residents are “new middle class,” the term used in sociological scholarship to describe India’s emerging, globally connected elite. The hub of India’s \$150 billion information technology (IT) industry, Bengaluru encompasses unique demographic characteristics that make it “not-your-typical-apocalyptic-megacity.” Instead, it is a city of public-sector enterprises, educational institutions, tech companies, organic boutiques, and English-style pubs. Its distinctive urban formations are sustained today by the one to two million IT and other professionalized workers who work in multinational and Indian technology corporations, investment banks, media, health care, and other service sectors. The lives and lifestyles of these high-tech workers are global, from their working hours, which are often in sync with US and UK time zones, to the kind of clothes they wear, the food they eat, the neighborhoods they live in, and the products they buy. Bengaluru is a critical node in a circuit that moves skilled migrant bodies through global tech hubs like San Francisco, Seattle, and Melbourne. Its elites are often the first to adopt what is in vogue in these global cities.<sup>12</sup>

My relationship with Bengaluru began as a child. My mother worked in the city as a journalist when she was pregnant with me, riding the public buses with her growing belly. I spent the first eight months of my life living in a railway colony behind Majestic, the city’s busy transportation hub. We visited Bangalore (its colonial name) frequently when I was growing up in Chennai (previously Madras), another metropolis in Southern India. For Madrasis like me, these visits were a sensory delight. Chennai was loud, crowded, busy, humid, and frenetic. The parts of Bangalore I visited as a

child, which included the tree-lined avenues of Malleswaram and the old groves in Ulsoor Lake, were cool, breezy, pleasant, and relaxing. We used to call Bangalore the air-conditioned city because of its temperate climes. I moved back to the city in my early twenties, seeking employment and a life unburdened by the traditional expectations of marriage and childbearing. I went to Bangalore because I found a job there, but also to escape parental and family scrutiny of my life choices. I drank in the city's many pubs (a taboo activity for women in India), started eating meat to the disappointment of my Brahminical family, jogged around Sankey tank, and enjoyed being a young consumer in a rapidly changing city.

Places like Bengaluru are viewed in contradictory ways; for growth boosters, they are sites of innovation and the future of tech-capitalism. The media and the government celebrate Bengaluru's cosmopolitan consumers as incontrovertible evidence of the efficacy of India's neoliberal economic reforms. But for environmentalists in the West, rising middle-class and elite consumption in Asia is a source of deep anxiety. From 2000 to 2015, the middle and upper classes of emerging countries increased their emissions more than any other group, reflecting increased incomes and access to global markets and consumer goods (Chancel and Piketty 2015). Although feverish portrayals of voracious consumers in China and India might whip US environmentalists into a frenzy, these broad-brush characterizations ignore the uneven nature of Asian development on the ground (Roy and Ong 2011). Indeed, the presence of high-consuming groups amid a sea of poverty reflects the profound inequities of India's economic successes (Oxfam International 2019), just as the high ecological footprints of Western consumers, even in comparison with high income groups in Asia, reflect the living histories of imperialism and racial-capitalism (Hickel et al. 2022). These forces concentrate wealth and comfort in privileged spaces and populations while extracting labor and resources from, and dumping waste in, the majority world (Patel and Moore 2018).

Imperial forces in their neoliberal avatars have also shaped Bengaluru's spaces and infrastructures. Starting in the late 1980s, structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund opened India up to foreign direct investment, deregulated a range of industrial and service sectors, and privatized public-sector enterprises (Fernandes 2009). These changes brought jobs and opportunities to dominant caste and middle-class urban Indians like me, while pushing others into further precarity. Whereas



symbols of globally connected lifestyles are abundantly visible in Bengaluru's swanky malls, chic coffee shops, gated communities, and car-clogged roads, markers of poverty can be spotted behind the tall buildings: in migrant worker camps, in the city's slums, and in its garbage dumps. Neoliberal policies that promote private consumption and underfund public infrastructure have encouraged the city's elite to consume and waste in order to power the engines of consumer capitalism, while relegating slum dwellers to intermittent water and energy supplies. Migrants sustain themselves by scavenging the city's discards, and COVID-19 patients across social classes used Twitter to hunt for hospital beds and oxygen cylinders during India's devastating Delta wave. But the city's, nay nation's, self-image depends on hiding away these ruptures and failures, and projecting itself as a vibrant, innovative, and investment-worthy "world-class" destination.

Bengaluru today is a different place than the cool oasis I imagined it to be in my childhood. The IT boom has cleaved and expanded Bengaluru. State-designated special economic zones cut through grazing lands and agrarian villages. Massive gated complexes, many built on ecologically sensitive lands commandeered for real estate construction through shady land deals, encircle the city, housing both tech workers and global capital seeking productive sites of investment (Doshi and Ranganathan 2017; Goldman 2011). Crisscrossing networks of elevated expressways dominate the landscape, plying the thousands of automobiles that are added to the roads every year (Gopakumar 2020). Critics argue that these changes have made Bengaluru a dystopian nightmare (Menon 2017). A city that was once narrated as India's garden city or a "pensioner's paradise" of tree-lined boulevards and colonial neighborhoods is now ranked as India's least-livable large metro. Scientists at the Indian Institute of Science warn that flooding and water scarcity will make the city unlivable as early as 2030. Bengaluru's lakes are burning and spewing chemical froth. Heavy rains in 2022 inundated many peri-urban areas, sparing neither the homes of CEOs nor the informal settlements where sanitation workers and waste pickers live (Ranganathan 2022). The city oscillates between droughts and floods. Despite these warnings, the juggernaut of eviscerating urbanization moves on, punctuated by cyclical garbage crises.

Garbage is a flashpoint for debates about urban futures in Bengaluru, just as it is in many majority world cities.<sup>13</sup> The city's development model aims to create a "clean and green," modern, globalized city of consumers, but this

very model produces ever-escalating amounts of daily discards that it struggles to cope with. Bengaluru produces somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 tons of solid waste every day, a number that has quadrupled in two decades.<sup>14</sup> As cities like Bengaluru have grown in size, population, and GDP, what gets thrown away has changed. There is more plastic in municipal waste, much of it nonrecyclable packaging materials used in those fast-moving consumer goods that urban Indians buy in growing quantities, as well as more construction and demolition waste from real estate development. These materials do not biodegrade, a property that renders open dumping, India's long-standing primary mode of waste disposal, woefully inadequate.<sup>15</sup> Waste dumping subjects the urban poor and peri-urban communities to a slow but deadly violence.<sup>16</sup> In the grazing and agrarian communities that receive Bengaluru's discards, groundwater is slowly poisoned. Children contract malaria and dengue from mosquitoes thriving in standing cesspools. Sometimes, people die, as they did in Mavallipura in 2012, prompting its residents to use their bodies to block garbage trucks.

Neoliberal agendas drive urban governments to pursue market-based and technocratic approaches to solve environmental problems. Bengaluru and other Indian cities have responded to cyclical garbage crises with the same neoliberal playbook, privatizing service provision, casualizing labor arrangements, and pursuing tech fixes that are poorly suited to local conditions, such as waste-to-energy plants (Luthra 2015). These interventions diagnose infrastructural deficits as a product of poor state practice, as opposed to lack of resources or structural inequalities (Doron and Jeffrey 2018). Moreover, although neoliberal programs like "smart cities" often purport to empower citizens and increase participation in municipal governance, they subvert democratic processes and can lead to splintered infrastructural development.<sup>17</sup> In Bengaluru, privatization strengthened the "garbage mafia"—private contractors from land-owning castes for whom waste management is a lucrative business—while worsening service provision for urban residents, labor conditions for sanitation workers, and waste access for informal waste pickers.

Suturing together patchy "formal" waste infrastructures are a network of waste pickers, sorters, itinerant buyers, scrap dealers, and recyclers. This parallel informal economy is based on extracting recyclable and reusable material from dumped mixed garbage, creating economic value (Gill 2009). At its core are waste pickers, millions of people across Asian, African, and

Latin American cities who make a livelihood reclaiming value from waste—some seeking more autonomy, some to escape exploitative waged work, and others seeking any possible employment in cities where work is hard to find (Dias 2016; Millar 2018).<sup>18</sup> This informal system provides an environmental service to the city by extending the useful life of commodities and diverting recyclable materials from dumpsites, while also reducing waste transportation costs for the municipality.<sup>19</sup> Yet, these “vernacular” circular economies are often denigrated as polluting and inefficient, and targeted for reform or replacement (Tucker and Anantharaman 2020).

In Bengaluru, as with other South Asian cities, working with waste is a stigmatized occupation because of its relation to caste. Waste removal through manual scavenging has been forced on Dalits, historically referred to as “untouchables,” a term I henceforth avoid because its very use is a form of symbolic violence (Shankar and Swaroop 2021). Caste enshrines inequality and dehumanization in routine ways in Hindu society (Ambedkar 2014; Guru 2011). Dalits and others who work with waste, especially human waste, are routinely subjected to physical, structural, and symbolic violence (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; P. Gupta 2022). Working with waste is associated with humiliation, while also exposing pickers to toxic substances and deadly working conditions. Those who work with waste are usually assumed to be lower-caste or Dalit, thus subjecting them to caste-based stigma (Kornberg 2019a). In other cultural contexts, waste picking is racialized work, disproportionately carried out by Afro-Brazilians, Indigenous people, and ethnic and religious minorities.

This is a familiar story not just in Bengaluru, but globally. Colonial, racial capitalism distributes hazards disproportionately onto marginalized communities that function as environmental sinks and subjects certain social groups to toxic and deadly work (Liboiron 2021). These processes, concentrating harm in certain places and bodies, operate at local, regional, and even global scales—indeed, Bengaluru is also the destination for e-waste discarded by consumers in the West, processed in its informal settlements by Muslim and Dalit recyclers (Reddy 2016). Meanwhile, environmental privilege allows people with economic and social capital to remain oblivious to these slow-moving, protracted disasters.<sup>20</sup> That is, unless and until they spectacularly erupt, whether via a strike by sanitation workers, or a blockade by the villagers of Mavallipura, or when China put up the “national sword,” leaving US municipalities scrambling for destinations for

their plastics. Disposability is an unfinished process (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). There is no real “away” for waste. These critical events, wherein garbage exceeds its designated boundaries and becomes matter out of place, threaten social order. They also illuminate flows, relations, and dependencies obscured within colonial-capitalisms’ ecologically unequal systems of exchange, shattering mythologies and sometimes sparking new mobilizations.

### Sustainability as Relational Terrain

This book takes the ideas, histories, flows, and relationships around waste in this critical node of global capitalism, itself a massive and growing environmental problem of planetary proportions, to push our understanding of what types of coalitions and movements are necessary to pursue just sustainabilities. My analytical approach is relational, situated, and plural. A relational approach, as practiced by situated urban political ecologists, sees individual subjectivities and the social world as (re)produced and transformed through everyday, materially mediated interactions among actors positioned differentially in social milieus (Lawhon, Ernstson, and Silver 2014). Such a perspective helps me argue that changes in environmental subjectivities are not simply produced by exposure to ideas from elsewhere, as presupposed by the predominant norm diffusion model of environmentalism emerging from theories of modernization and enlightenment. Ideas matter, yes, but environmental subjectivities emerge from everyday friction, obdurate material conditions, political struggles, community experimentation, and unlikely alliances.<sup>21</sup>

Sustainability is perhaps the most ill-defined word in the canon of environmental action (Greenberg 2013). It is an empty signifier par excellence. This very amorphous, yet increasingly ubiquitous quality makes sustainability discourse and practice a potent vehicle for politics, despite its apolitical and technocratic framing.<sup>22</sup> Like economic development, it is quickly emerging as a dominant ideology and framework for material action in global cities (Castán Broto and Westman 2019; Bulkeley 2013). It is also a disadvantageous terrain of struggle for the urban poor. Following the Relational Poverty Network’s call to expand and enliven poverty research into new domains, I examine sustainability as a terrain or “contact zone” where “poor others” are engaged and acted on by powerful groups in the city.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, I show how the former resist, co-opt, and negotiate elite

environmental activism. Ultimately, I argue that it is through “contact,” occurring in this case through the material, metabolic bonds of garbage, that sustainability can be reclaimed as a progressive discourse that informs action on the ground.<sup>24</sup>

A relational approach also sees power as diffused and enacted through socio-material landscapes (Castán Broto and Calvet 2020). It moves away from reductionist, dualist conceptions of conflict, instead seeking nuanced explanations of power differentials and leaving open room to see how marginalized groups resist and negotiate environmental injustices (Le Billon and Duffy 2018). Situated analysis can help locate agency and reveal how power can be reclaimed in incremental steps through recursive empowerment (Pieterse 2021). It helps us look for seeds of change in exploitative systems and consider how transforming an unsustainable status quo requires engagement with it (Castán Broto and Westman 2019, 64). Thus, I begin with local context, identities, and everyday practice, and use epistemologies beyond those of the Global North to explore and explain the actually existing ecologies of the city. This approach is especially important because theories emerging from Western democracies do not always make sense in other places. For example, calls for more citizen and community involvement to expand the frontiers of urban sustainability do not travel well to cities where elites have captured most participatory initiatives, and where civil society is constructed to systematically exclude subaltern groups.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, I refuse to see diverse schools of environmental thought as incompatible.<sup>26</sup> Trained as an interdisciplinary scholar, I am a promiscuous intellectual. I combine the insights of Marxist geographers, political ecologists, cultural sociologists, discard-studies scholars, and theorists of caste and racial capitalism. I pay attention to social locations, material conditions, governing regimes, ideological orientations, and actions, in relation to one another. My analysis also considers state power, in its different forms, to explain why groups take up certain environmental strategies, when they succeed, and why they fail.<sup>27</sup>

Because of my situated and relational approach, this story might sometimes seem contradictory. I recount instances where the middle classes and the working poor have formed positive alliances, but then go on to describe how those alliances now make waste pickers beholden to a new set of interests and actors. I complicate the idea that economic inclusion into sustainability infrastructure is beneficial to informal workers by showing how

inclusion is designed to primarily serve the ends of capital accumulation and neoliberal austerity. Ultimately, I argue that, despite opening them to new forms of exploitation, partnership with middle-class actors also gives waste pickers and their allies access to new arenas for political negotiation. Cross-class alliances around waste are contradictory, both challenging and reinforcing gender, class, and caste hierarchies. These contradictions are central findings of this work; scholars seeking just sustainabilities need to be attentive to both the oppressive and liberatory outcomes of particular events. As discard-studies scholars Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky assert, “As researchers, we must also account for permanent toxicity, gross inequalities and power differentials . . . a need to offer alternative practices as much as critique, and humble narratives that leave for open and diverse futures” (2022, 30). It is in this spirit that I offer this analysis.

In the three sections that follow, I highlight the theoretical contributions of this project to scholarship on environmental sociology and politics, global environmental justice, and sustainability studies, before discussing my methodological approach.

### **Everyday Environmentalism in Unequal Cities**

My book contributes to *environmental sociology and politics* by critically examining the green consumption and community mobilization of Bengaluru’s elite middle classes in relation to global sustainability discourses and the environmental labor and political claims of the working poor. Discussions of environmental issues in Asia are often framed as large-scale problems of state and global governance linked to the development of spectacular infrastructures or market mechanisms. But unstable urban ecologies are birthing diverse environmental social movements. While robust debates exist on the *environmentalism of the poor* of rural communities in South Asia, ethnographic portraits of urban environmental subjectivities are still emerging (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013). Yet, South Asian cities are the densest and most-populated urban agglomerations in the world, housing about 700 million people, 130 million of whom live in informal settlements.

As South Asian cities strive to emulate “world-class” models like Singapore, tensions among growth, equity, and ecology regularly ignite around slum removal (Doshi 2019; Ghertner 2012), river and lake restoration (Rademacher 2011; Sen, Unnikrishnan, and Nagendra 2021), green space

development (Coelho 2020), food systems (Frazier 2018), streetscapes (Anjaria 2009), air pollution (Véron 2006), and garbage (Luthra 2018; S. Sharma 2022). Across diverse cases, the new middle classes, thanks to their growing economic power and cultural hegemony, have had the most success gaining recognition for their environmental claims. Middle-class narratives of environmentalism are extremely popular, especially among those who hold power within the status quo. But sociologist Amita Baviskar cautions that middle-class environmental efforts often have little to do with either ecology or justice (Baviskar 2019b). Acting often through the judicial system, these *bourgeois environmentalists* use discourses of hygiene and public nuisance to refashion public space to match their aesthetic preferences, advocating the demolition of informal settlements and displacement of informal livelihoods. This brand of exclusionary environmentalism is particularly attractive to the state because it aligns with capitalist, modernizing agendas.

But middle-class environmentalism is evolving. Postcolonial frameworks of environmentalism offer an increasingly incomplete picture of practice-based movements emerging under fragile infrastructures, neoliberal (self)governance and austerity regimes, rapid local environmental degradation, and circulating narratives of modernity in global crisis. “Everyday” or “lifestyle” environmentalisms are proliferating across the Global North.<sup>28</sup> Bengaluru, sitting at a global crossroads with a significant proportion of dominant-caste diasporic returnees, yet embedded in local caste relations and ecologies, has evolved an articulation of diverse environmentalisms together.

Responding to the degradation of their local environments, desiring to keep up with counterparts in other global hipster cities like San Francisco, and seeking to enact cosmopolitan ideals of ecological citizenship, sectors of Bengaluru’s elite middle classes are adopting a range of green lifestyle practices. Many are riding bicycles to work, eating organic food, and recycling and composting their wastes. They convene communities of practice to sustain and expand green lifestyles in the city. These everyday environmental movements are not unique to Bengaluru. Across Asia, experiments in green living are proliferating, some grassroots efforts and others prompted by state schemes and green marketing (Lewis 2016). Members of these communities talk eloquently about the importance of voluntary simplicity, individual obligation, and ecological citizenship, a marked contrast from previous expressions of elite environmental activism in Indian cities

that generally sought to evade environmental responsibility (Bulkeley and Castán Broto 2014; Frazier 2018). Instead, the mantras of these new movements include “it starts at home” and “eat what you grow.”

These lifestyle movements and community-based sustainability efforts nevertheless reproduce class and caste oppression through aesthetic and discursive markers that delegitimize the knowledge, contributions, and practices of the poor, while simultaneously relying on them for metabolic labor to do green practices. In chapter 1, I draw on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) to retheorize the term *performative environmentalism* to describe environmental engagement through lifestyle changes and neighborhood activism by Bengaluru’s cultural elites. Performative environmentalism is distinct from bourgeois environmentalism in that it does not deflect blame for urban dysfunction onto the poor. Instead, it questions urban growth trajectories and promotes ecological citizenship through collective efforts at changing consumption practices. It nevertheless *others* the poor through class- and caste-based aesthetic and discursive markers. Even though performative environmentalists might not actively call for slum removal, they employ *defensive distinctions* to distance themselves from the necessity-oriented green practices of the poor, in order to legitimize environmental actions within their own class and caste groups. In doing so, they exclude the urban poor from their conceptions of green community.

This concept can help us critically examine the cultural politics of everyday environmentalism in other unequal cities harboring diverse social groups (i.e., most cities). Cities around the world are investing in green infrastructures like public transit systems, bike lanes, and farmers markets as both climate and urban competitiveness strategies (Rosan and Pearsall 2018; Stehlin 2019). Yet, as *critical sustainability* scholars warn, actions carried out in the name of sustainability can burden racialized others and displace working classes that lack consumption power (Anguelovski and Connolly 2021; Isenhour, McDonogh, and Checker 2014). My concept of performative environmentalism adds to this literature by showing how well-meaning environmentalists (often inadvertently) participate in these exclusions through their cultural strategies of consumption. Performative environmentalism is sincere, ethically driven, and involves material action by committed individuals. However, at the scale of social structure, it functions as ideological gloss, reproducing class and caste hierarchies.



The scholarship on sustainability in Global North cities critiques how neoliberal ideologies have individualized and depoliticized environmentalism (Maniates 2001). As geographer Eric Swyngedouw explains, neoliberal post-politicization has created important roles for technocrats, business managers, and consumers while marginalizing other, more conflictual subject positions.<sup>29</sup> Only convivial and conciliatory community initiatives are sanctioned within neoliberal sustainability.<sup>30</sup> Yet, while these theorizations explain why environmentalism functions as anti-politics in Global North cities, they do not adequately capture what I witnessed in Bengaluru.

Bengaluru's circumstances compel political contention and coalition building as part of environmental projects.<sup>31</sup> While middle-class people might have hoped to get away from the state and the poor to meet their (greening) needs, the lack of market provisioning of green living and loose infrastructural threads exacerbated by neoliberal disinvestment necessitated community organizing. Elite and middle-class groups have long used civic associations like residents' welfare associations to make political claims on the state, whereas here I describe place-based material enactment of environmental politics. In chapter 2, I draw on intersectional theories of social reproduction developed by feminist geographers to articulate the concept of *communal sustainability*. Communal sustainability describes neighborhood-based interventions designed to replace spectacular infrastructure, technocratic expertise, and waste dumping. Instead, housewives, retired men, and other unlikely suspects deploy affective and reproductive labor to change household behavior, build small-scale infrastructures, and convene collaborative systems of governance.

Communal sustainability goes beyond simplistic explanations of environmental harm that blame lack of knowledge, bad behavior, or immorality for garbage crises to instead identify collective pathways to overcome shared environmental problems. But in its material solutions to environmental problems, communal sustainability mobilizes metabolic divisions of community that are gendered, classed, and casted. Originating in the caste system, the notions of community operational in these initiatives are restricted to the middle class and dominant castes, casting waste workers as noncommunity members who need to be disciplined and monitored (as in the opening vignette).<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, I caution that there are limits to seeing the performance of gendered and casted reproductive labor solely through the lens of governmentality or the extraction of surplus labor. Also operative here is a sense of

empowerment, a building of shared identity, and an enactment of politics for those engaged in this work, which cannot be reduced to a narrow economism or top-down governmentalization. Rather, communal sustainability, in its dependence on volunteer effort and manual labor, challenges neoliberal sustainability's individualizing and marketizing tendencies. I highlight a paradox—communal sustainability can exacerbate existing class, caste, and gender-based oppression while simultaneously opening up new avenues for political participation by middle-class women and, as we will see next, by some waste workers.<sup>33</sup> In the discussion that follows, I center the unheralded *entrepreneurial environmentalisms* of the city's waste pickers, whose participation in zero-waste programs helped reframe garbage as a sociopolitical problem and not simply a technical, managerial, or behavioral one.

### New Environmentalisms of the Poor

My book contributes to studies of *global environmental justice* by analyzing how waste labor becomes a route for oppressed groups to participate in sustainable city-making. The role of work and workers remains underexplored in the environmental literature. But, as geographer Rosalind Fredericks (2018) argues, analyzing urban labor as the basis of citizenship is a powerful lens through which to make “theory from the South” about the neoliberal era. Such theory-making pushes back against a reading of neoliberalism as a juggernaut, instead bringing attention to the multiple and contradictory ways in which diverse actors resist, appropriate, and transform neoliberal (environmental) ideologies and neoliberalizing processes.

The power to define what counts as sustainable is unequally distributed. Poor, working-class, and nondominant-caste people in Indian cities have struggled to gain recognition for their environmental claims (Baviskar 2019a). Because working-class urban livelihoods are more often associated with industrial or service activities, struggles to preserve these livelihoods or establish a “right to the city” are less readily legitimated as the environmentalism of the poor.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, because of their limited consuming power and consistent disenfranchisement in civil society spaces, these communities have fewer opportunities to perform environmentalism through consumption and civic activism.<sup>35</sup> Critically, because they are forced to live in “dirty places,” which are dirty because the state has failed to provide basic infrastructures of waste collection, their habitat concerns are sometimes

automatically deemed to be anti-environment by the state (M. Sharma 2017b). In extreme cases, they are simply not recognized as legitimate citizens of the urban polity (Chu and Michael 2019).

Exclusive and antipoor environmentalisms perpetuate Band-Aid solutions. As long as the poor and working classes are scapegoated for the problem of waste, for instance, plastic producers, brands, and the state can avoid critical attention and censure. This was certainly the case in Bengaluru, where for a long time, middle-class environmentalists blamed sanitation workers for the failure of recycling initiatives. Informal waste pickers and recyclers, the only agents recycling and recovering resources in Asian, African, and Latin American cities, have long operated in the shadows, evading punitive municipal policies and paternalistic formalization projects (Dias and Samson 2016).<sup>36</sup> Even eco-activists like Kranthi were ignorant or distrustful of informal waste economies, preferring to partner with private companies like ITC. Despite the antipoor nature of environmentalism, many members of the urban poor have no choice but to participate in the sustainability conversation, even if on unequal terms. Not engaging might only bring further violence and dispossession.

Tracking the formation, evolution, and activities of Parisara Tanda for over a decade, I document a new expression of the environmentalism of the poor. Parisara Tanda, which translates to “green force” in English, was informally founded in 2011, just as the middle-class zero-waste movement (ZWM) was recruiting corporate partners to run recycling centers in the city and enclosing recyclables within privatized value chains. It was created by middle-class labor organizers and community workers with the explicit goal of halting the corporate capture of Bengaluru’s nascent zero-waste systems. Parisara Tanda, learning from the playbook of waste-picker organizations in South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and Indian cities like Pune, built a collective identity for waste pickers by emphasizing the environmental and economic contributions of their work. But in contrast to these other cases, Parisara Tanda prioritized building strategic coalitions with middle-class environmentalists and approached the state in partnership with middle-class organizations.<sup>37</sup> To convince the casteist ZWM of waste pickers’ worth, Parisara Tanda engaged in what one scrap dealer in a 2013 community meeting called a “face-lift,” refashioning the public image of waste pickers and scrap dealers from abject and dangerous to *entrepreneurial environmentalists*.

While *global environmental justice* scholarship has focused largely on studying and defending the environmental rights of urban populations, I show that the “gospel of eco-efficiency” (Martinez-Alier 2003), central to neoliberal environmentalism, has influenced the environmentalism of the poor. In chapter 3, I rely on postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s (1999) concept of strategic essentialism to explain how middle-class sustainability discourses enable new modes of claims-making for subaltern groups in the city. I deploy the phrase *of use to the city* as a counterpoint to *the right to the city* to discuss how Parisara Tanda uses neoliberal discourses to protect waste-based livelihoods. It leverages performative environmentalism’s aesthetic and behavioral biases, alongside neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurial valor, to make political claims for waste pickers’ rights and urban belonging.<sup>38</sup>

By examining sustainability not just in discourse, but also through practices of discarding, reclaiming, and recycling, I advance new concepts that consider waste infrastructure as sites of infrastructural citizenship by both elites and excluded groups. While infrastructure is commonly understood as physical provisioning systems comprising roads, pipes, and wires, urban political ecologists have drawn attention to how people, through practices and social relations, function as social infrastructures enabling cities and economies to function (Furlong 2011; Simone 2004). Waste and water infrastructures are also the sites of political action, through which excluded publics make themselves known, seen, and heard.<sup>39</sup>

Doing sustainability in Bengaluru evokes *infrastructural citizenship*, from the elite who seek to fashion solutions that materialize their environmental sensibilities, and from the poor defending their livelihoods. Elites and middle classes exercise undue influence over urban infrastructures. Participatory mechanisms convened by the Indian state have elevated the voices of elite and educated citizenry in urban governance regimes that value managerial capacities over labor.<sup>40</sup> Despite the odds, informal waste pickers and recyclers also influence the form of sustainability infrastructures, leveraging both their labor and their accumulated knowledge of waste materials to facilitate flows and reveal ruptures. Metabolic relations around waste are where these groups resist, co-opt, and negotiate each other’s conceptions of problem and solution.

In chapter 4, I show how the entrepreneurial capacities of informal waste pickers combine with the aesthetic and civic sensibilities of the middle classes to coproduce what I call *DIY infrastructures*. A cash-strapped municipal

government supports DIY infrastructures because they transfer the responsibility for urban sustainability and service provision from the municipality onto waste pickers and middle-class women. DIY infrastructures advance more democratized and participatory forms of sustainability, challenging the technocratic capture of waste management systems. Yet, its efficacy as a technology that “discards well” is undermined by scalar mismatches and sociocultural hierarchies that enable elites to pass off the burden of operating infrastructure to less powerful groups. Waste pickers in turn leverage their inclusion into these infrastructures to exercise citizenship. They engage in *materially mediated activism* to redesign systems and policies. Because of their advocacy, in 2018, the Bengaluru municipality decided to issue dry waste collection contracts exclusively to waste pickers and provide them with collection vehicles. This *stealth remunicipalization* of waste infrastructures was a significant change from the trajectories of privatization that Indian cities have seen since the early 2000s. Although these gains are contingent and progressive policies are constantly under threat of being reversed, they demonstrate that waste-picker organizations are a political force shaping urban futures.<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, I demonstrate that global urban sustainability, with its pressures to green the city, green lifestyles, and, through this, display urban vitality and competitiveness, has created new motifs and avenues of social inclusion, exclusion, and political participation. Today, waste pickers are leveraging environmental arguments to make political claims not just in Bengaluru but also in South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, at UN Climate Summits, and, most recently, in the negotiation of the global plastics treaty.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, they are expanding the notions of who gets to participate in local and global environmental negotiations. Waste-picker organizations have made successful claims for inclusion into municipal waste infrastructures in Johannesburg, Pune, Belo Horizonte, and other cities. At the same time, inclusion is a double-edged sword. Governments engaging in “roll-out neoliberalism” are constantly conscripting (already oppressed) communities into conducting basic metabolic functions to keep cities functional, at lowest cost (H. Anantharaman 2019). As sociologist Manuel Rosaldo (2019) points out, waste pickers navigating unjust urban regimes often must choose between dispossession and exploitation (see also O’Hare 2020). Next, I evaluate the outcomes of these claims-making strategies and infrastructural collective action, asking both what they do for waste pickers and what we can learn from them.

## Toward Cross-Class Collective Action for Just Sustainabilities

My book links scholarship on *just sustainabilities* and *discard studies* by examining how ideas about sustainability disrupt, dismiss, and change the lives of those who depend on circuits of waste for their livelihoods and, in turn, how waste workers alter urban sustainability agendas through their labor and activism. Just sustainabilities scholars Vanesa Castán Broto and Linda Westman (2019) assert that to recover sustainability from its techno-managerial shackles and make it a force for social justice, we need collective action that starts from the situated experiences of urban citizens, centers the experiences and needs of oppressed groups, and cultivates leadership from below. Yet, gross inequality impedes collective action on environmental issues, both because how people experience, understand, and respond to environmental problems varies based on their social locations and because these differential positions indicate different relationships to and perspectives on systems of oppression.<sup>43</sup> In a world where the oppression of some maintains “good” environments for others, sustainability projects shape and are shaped by social location (see also Sze 2018). Therefore, following these insights of intersectionality and diversity theorists, I assert that to identify pathways to just sustainabilities, studies of environmental collective action must consider sociocultural inequalities, racialized social relations, and identity formation to evaluate the emancipatory possibilities of different collective action projects.<sup>44</sup> I explore these dynamics among Bengaluru’s discards.

How people problematize waste as an environmental problem is situated and partial. For oppressor caste, middle-class consumers, caste and class privilege keeps them at the center of urban life, from which waste is discarded away onto peripheral “sacrifice zones” (Lerner 2012). Caste blindness and denial enables (often willful) ignorance. Add neoliberal narratives that bad consumer behavior and poor disposal infrastructure are the driving causes of garbage crises, and you have a powerful mythology as to why the city is dirty and what can be done about it. A large and coordinated network of big brands and fossil fuel companies maintain this mythology by promoting piecemeal recycling schemes that circumvent regulation, buttress corporate profit, and dovetail with a green-growth agenda (MacBride 2011; Mah 2022). Environmental campaigns and scientific research on plastic and e-waste pollution place the onus for fixing the waste problem firmly onto consumers and municipalities.<sup>45</sup> Industry promotes recycling because

it is profitable to move the costs of dealing with disposables onto the public, while also giving the impression that disposables are a sustainable type of waste (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 70). Yet, many materials marked as recyclable are often not, because of lack of technology, fluctuating prices, or contamination.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, self-avowed environmentalists like Kranthi devote themselves to their local schemes, blaming the poor when their misguided efforts fail. The mythologies of neoliberal sustainability keep them trapped in these false forms of environmentalism.

Problem framings determine action: the stories people tell about what drives socio-environmental issues shape how they respond to them. Thus, it is imperative to ask, what forms of environmental collective action reinscribe existing mythologies that see pollution not as a constitutive feature of a colonial-capitalist economy, but as a mere externality that can be eliminated or displaced with the right markets, technology, design, and behavior? In contrast, what forms of collective action enable “defamiliarization and demythologization,”<sup>47</sup> that is, the transformative learning that changes how waste is problematized as an environmental issue, and births new environmental subjectivities and movements that center issues of justice? The final two chapters of this book contrast two forms of environmental collective action to explore these questions.

In chapter 5, I examine how urban struggles over the environment and livelihood articulate with transnational sets of questions around how to restructure global capitalism in a time of overlapping ecological crises. I examine transnational circuits of resource recovery articulating around the *circular economy*, which connect multinational corporations, global development actors, start-ups, and waste-picker organizations. Accelerating fears of resource shortages and the search for new productive frontiers of economic growth combined with heightened awareness of how waste and plastic pollution contribute to climate change and biodiversity loss have intensified efforts to reclaim value from discards. Multinational brands are looking to include waste pickers in recycled plastic supply chains, recognizing their unique knowledge of waste materials and needing cheap labor. Start-ups function as *legibility brokers*, linking waste pickers with the circuits of global capital. I find, however, that the “win-win” narrative of the circular economy is turning inclusion into a Trojan horse for capitalist gain.

The win-win narrative of a circular economy as applied to informal waste pickers obscures a tension between corporate profits and material

improvements to the lives of informal workers. Circular economy discourse is replete with neoliberal “common sense” that promotes economic efficiency and market-based solutions to environmental problems. These logics subject waste pickers to new regimes of discipline that reproduce a dehumanizing division of labor. These initiatives can help some entrepreneurial waste pickers enhance their skills, improve incomes, and imagine social and career mobility for themselves and their children, but these benefits are not available to most. When initiatives privilege economic growth and corporate profit over other social priorities, *accumulation by inclusion* is the outcome. Ultimately, reclaiming value from waste in support of “win-win” sustainability goals (whether the clean city or circular economy) enshrines the continued wasting of people by retaining them in subordinated roles. When workers are held in subordinate positions and framed as needing to discipline and improve themselves, they have fewer opportunities to function as political or pedagogical agents.

Inclusion is a buzzword in sustainability and circular economy discourse today. The inclusion of waste pickers into resource recovery and recycling schemes has finally become a priority for global development organizations, the UN system, and for some national governments. In the coming years, as national governments, social movements, and multinational corporations negotiate the global plastics treaty and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, Bengaluru’s story cautions that the reliance on caste-determined environmental labor to produce sustainable cities or circular economies ultimately serves the ends of capital accumulation. Racial capitalism infiltrates and articulates with environmental mobilizations in contemporary cities, conscripting even well-meaning environmentalists into facilitating repackaged forms of exploitation. My work issues a warning: inclusion in the absence of a clear commitment to social reform and reparation could very well reproduce racialized oppression.

Yet, garbage is democratizing. It presents a moral and ethical problem that invites individual and community action to address its proximate causes and impacts (Douglas 2003; Hawkins 2001). In cities across the majority world, waste has played an outsized role in sparking civic activism and environmental mobilization, sometimes toppling governments and igniting social revolutions (Loschi 2019). In a more communal vein, civic-minded individuals encourage their neighbors to carefully segregate their discards, hoping to reduce the amount of waste ending up on the roadside and in



landfills. Workers toil in materials recovery facilities, surrounded by piles of paper, plastics, and metals. Waste infrastructure, through the people it brings together and metabolic connections it creates, can also provide opportunities for political resistance, and even convene new relationships and unexpected coalitions.<sup>48</sup> Within communal sustainability initiatives, identification with a common set of goals opens new avenues for collaboration between middle-class women and waste workers. Building of shared identities and common projects like DIY infrastructures can build community assets, sustain cross-class collective action, and even result in shared political demands (Green and Haines 2015; Rigon and Castán Broto 2021). Recycling programs are not just vehicles for corporate greenwashing, but also domains for the expression of infrastructural citizenship and claims-making. Thus, despite opening themselves to new global circuits of exploitation, collaboration with middle-class environmentalists gives waste pickers access to new arenas for political negotiation through infrastructural citizenship.

In the conclusion, I take inspiration from the ways in which waste pickers and their representatives have engaged in a concerted program of popular education. Waste-picker organizations, through a perceptive use of traditional and social media, chronicle the doublespeak of the state and the failures of performative environmentalism. They reclaim political agency in communal sustainability through their work and advocacy at reflecting back to the city the metabolic flows it attempts to hide. The storytelling that waste pickers and their advocates do in these spaces is an act of radical pedagogy. It demystifies recycling as an industrial process, demonstrates the limits of downstream solutions to plastic pollution, and is forcing middle-class actors to problematize throwaway culture and consumer capitalism more centrally. Yet, for justice to be achieved, environmentalists must also grapple with the ways in which their initiatives condone and perpetuate casteism.

In closing, I argue for an agenda of *reparation by inclusion*, which leverages sustainability and circular economy to demand more material and intellectual investment into informal economies, as well as access to more social entitlements for informal waste pickers. It resists rebranding self-exploitation as entrepreneurship and deemphasizes efficiency in place of justice. It starts with a recognition that informal economies have long subsidized the conditions of capital accumulation, and that any sustainability effort will have to acknowledge and redress existing injustice through grassroots leadership.

Enacting reparation by inclusion will require the circular economy and other sustainability paradigms to go beyond a narrow economic rationality to reemphasize mutual vulnerability through transformative coalitions.

This book ultimately argues that by bringing together unlikely alliances anchored in material action, communal sustainability serves as a terrain that can produce politics that impede neoliberal capture. However, this transformative potential of local action is constantly threatened by the commodifying and co-opting forces of global capitalism, which threaten to subsume place-based experiments into a corporate green-growth agenda. It is also compromised by the denial of casteism, which locks waste pickers into subordinate roles in communal schemes. Even though communal sustainability, as emerging from and practiced by middle-class zero-waste warriors, politicizes the waste crisis by connecting it to urban development and consumerism, it does not question caste, and thus struggles to emerge as a transformative coalition centering justice and equity. Communal hierarchies and differences (along lines of race, caste, and ethnicity) undermine collective and communitarian routes to just sustainabilities. To move forward, privileged environmentalists, scholars, and activists must listen to waste pickers and prioritize social reform and reparation over aesthetics or efficiency.

### **My Relation to This Project**

The methodological approach of this work is long-standing and community-engaged, focused on understanding everyday life through participant observation, discourse analysis, and qualitative interviews. This book narrates the making of a sustainable city through everyday practices within homes, in neighborhoods, in planning and advocacy spaces, in recycling centers, and on the street. With a decade of concerted engagement with communities and individuals involved in Bengaluru's zero-waste movement, I offer a long-term perspective. My work with Parisara Tanda, the waste-picker organization profiled in the book, offers a unique vantage point from which I can examine the politics and outcomes of sustainability initiatives. I offer more explanation about the data and fieldwork for each chapter in the accompanying notes.

The bulk of the ethnographic work on this project took place from 2011 to 2013. I landed in Bengaluru as a recent convert to the social sciences with, I now think, naïve questions about how and why consumers adopt

environmental behaviors and become environmentally engaged.<sup>49</sup> I spent the first few months interviewing middle-class individuals and families who practiced and promoted green lifestyle practices like bicycling, purchasing and growing organic food, and home composting.<sup>50</sup> Once I realized that these practices were embedded in community formations such as neighborhood networks, online email groups, Facebook groups, and citywide clubs, I directed my attention to learning more about these communities of practice. I complemented qualitative interviews with visits to people's homes and to neighborhood recycling initiatives, observations at various public events organized around eco-friendly living, and online ethnography.

Bengaluru's metabolic story transformed my research as well. In August 2012, when the city was plunged into another garbage crisis, those women I was studying for their household and community practices were appearing on TV panels. These green lifestyle practitioners were capitalizing on opportunities presented by the city's latest garbage crisis. I followed the story and needed to acquire a new theoretical tool kit to make sense of it.<sup>51</sup> In addition to interviewing practitioners, I contacted representatives from NGOs and advocacy groups, waste management service providers, and informal economy member-based organizations. I engaged the Clean and Green Forum (TCGF), a citywide waste management advocacy network and public interest group. During my engagement with TCGF, I attended many of their weekly meetings (which are open to observers), went to High Court hearings with members from the forum, and participated in some of their waste management awareness drives. I also embedded myself with a neighborhood-based zero-waste initiative in northeast Bengaluru called the Care Collective. I participated in their weekly planning meetings and accompanied the group when they conducted waste management awareness sessions in apartment complexes and neighborhood associations.

Only in late 2012 did I begin to think more seriously about the question of labor and work in these emerging zero-waste initiatives. At one of the court hearings, I heard a Parisara Tanda staff member talk about waste pickers and the need to include them into emerging decentralized infrastructure. Soon, I connected with the organization and offered to help. I was invited to join them as a consultant. I started working with Parisara Tanda, helping develop website content, writing grant applications, and developing outreach materials. I spent an average of one day per week in their office for four months in early 2013, engaging with staff and waste

pickers. I attended monthly member meetings and other events. I watched as they built a strategic coalition with the middle-class TCGF. Parisara Tanda and TCGF convinced the Karnataka High Court bench that including waste pickers in formal waste management was an economically sensible and expedient move: “They are the best at cleaning the city. They can do it for no money. They know how to earn from the waste itself.” This statement, made by TCGF’s lawyer, while casteist and classist, sought to gain recognition for the labor of waste pickers within existing regimes of valuation in the city.

After leaving “the field,” I made return visits to Bengaluru in 2016, 2018, 2019, and again in 2022 after COVID-19. I conducted follow-up interviews with middle-class waste activists and Parisara Tanda staff. I visited some of the new waste processing sites that had been set up in the past few years. I also assisted Parisara Tanda in various research tasks, reviewing reports and policy briefs for the organization. My relationship with the organization continues to date, and I consider myself their ally. At the same time, as you will see, I raise some critical questions and points for reflection, of which they are aware. However, my proximity and connection to the organization is certainly something the reader should keep in mind while evaluating my analysis. I should also be clear that this is not a study of the informal recycling sector, waste pickers, or waste picking. I analyze the political claims, choices, and public discourses of a nongovernmental organization and waste pickers affiliated with it in relation to predominant urban sustainability policies and practices. I made an intentional decision not to make waste pickers the target of my study. This is an act of studying-up—prompted also by my privileged positionality, which I explain below. When I share the voices of individual waste pickers, these are from public media sources. This was a deliberate choice to amplify the advocacy and storytelling that waste pickers were already engaged in themselves in public fora.

My analysis of the class, caste, and gender politics of this story is also inseparable from my own positionality as a woman born into a Brahmin, middle-class family in Chennai. Throughout the book, I reflect on my own positionality, the ways in which my biases and prejudices have been challenged by my engagement with diverse actors, and my struggles to reconcile what I witnessed with what I thought I knew. My research and engagement with and alongside waste pickers politicized me, finally forcing me to confront the ways in which I had been socialized to ignore, sanction, and practice casteism in my own life. Since 2013, I have been struggling to confront

the Brahminism in my own body. I started eating meat and reading the works of key Dalit scholars and activists in an attempt to unlearn caste and engage my family about our collective complicity in perpetuating casteism. This will be a lifelong journey. My work as an educator of justice, community, and leadership in Northern California has also helped me think more deeply about questions of racialized oppression in environmentalism and sustainability, and about research justice. I offer this self-examination to be transparent about the conditions under which I make these claims.

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