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# Recycling Class

## The Contradictions of Inclusion in Urban Sustainability

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# 1 Consuming the Clean and Green City

I meet Swamy in his eco-home in one of Bengaluru's most expensive central neighborhoods. Trained as an engineer and today the head of a manufacturing firm, Swamy describes himself on his website as a "foodie, animal lover, and environment nut." Swamy calls his home Kachra Mane. The phrase loosely translates to "waste home," referencing the incorporation of materials once discarded as waste into its construction. A beautiful space, Kachra Mane spoke to my own aesthetic sensibilities. Large airy windows were shaded by a canopy of old-growth trees. The inside was sparsely but tastefully furnished.

As I took a seat by a window on a handloomed cushion, Swamy sat opposite me and told me that his home had recently been featured in an interior design magazine for its low-carbon, low-cost construction. He beamed with pride as he described the two toilets that had been outfitted with secondhand commodes obtained from a shop that reclaimed materials from demolished buildings. The roof was built with corrugated bamboo, the floor was simply polished cement, and most of the walls were windows. As we chatted, a monkey peered into the house. It was an idyllic setting, a wonderful respite for this tired ethnographer who had just traversed Bengaluru's hectic roads to interview Swamy about his green consumption practices.

Swamy sees himself as an avowed and dedicated environmentalist. His website offers tips on how to reduce energy and water use in the home, including a particularly descriptive entry on how to reduce ironing (do not iron above the crotch). He is an engaging speaker with a sense of humor. Schools, colleges, and corporate offices invite him to give talks on how to live an eco-friendly life in Bengaluru. His insistence on wearing what he calls his cyclist uniform—a bicycle helmet and bike shorts—in these

professional and civil society spaces makes him conspicuous. Indeed, one of the first things Swamy tells you when you meet him is that a bicycle is his primary mode of transport. He also occasionally uses autos and buses, but he almost never drives a car. He knows that this makes him different, maybe even strange, in a society where the car is a symbol of respectability and propertied citizenship (Baviskar 2011).

I asked Swamy about how he came to change his everyday consumption practices:

I was cycling until about high school. And like everyone else, I quit. After that I became a standard urban climber. So, when I started working, when I could afford to, I bought a moped, and then I could afford more and I bought a scooter, and then . . . and then a Ford Fusion, and with that I stopped. . . . I started cycling about twelve years ago. When I hit forty, I hit sense and realized it doesn't make sense to add to the condition.

Swamy is not alone in his eco-lifestyle choices. In the past decade, consumer-based environmentalism has taken root in Bengaluru. In a departure from slum removal and urban ordering campaigns that targeted the city "out there," it appears today that some sectors of Bengaluru's new middle classes<sup>1</sup> are problematizing their household consumption practices in relation to the deteriorating "condition" of urban and global environments. Bengaluru has become an incubator for green consumption practices, with vibrant communities emerging around bicycling, organic food consumption, urban gardening, and zero-waste management.

Embodied experiences of local environmental change, as well as circulating discourses of global ecological crises, motivate these eco-practitioners. Bengalureans are growing food on rooftops and balconies to avoid the pesticides and chemical fertilizers in commercially grown food (Frazier 2018), and as an act of resilience in an unstable urban ecology (van Holstein 2019). Composting and recycling have emerged as ways to take back personal control over Bengaluru's garbage woes (M. Anantharaman 2014). Cyclists like Swamy point to health, fitness, and concern about climate change as motivating factors, while also articulating pleasure at the speed and flexibility they experience traversing Bengaluru's traffic-choked roads on a bicycle (M. Anantharaman 2017). Families avoid prepackaged meals or limit food waste because it has always been in their traditions to eat fresh food every day (Ganguly 2017). Across the board, they recognize the impacts of their

consumption choices and want to do their bit to “save the planet” while improving their city.<sup>2</sup> They are not alone. Worldwide, members of the middle classes and the elite appear to be trying to offset the environmental damage produced by their consumption by attempting to modify their everyday practices to become more “sustainable.”

At first glance, these lifestyle-based environmental movements appear to be a radical departure from the escalating consumerism characteristic of India's new middle classes, but closer examination reveals that green consumption is also constrained and driven by social status concerns within a highly unequal and rigid class/caste order. I repurpose the term *performative environmentalism* to understand the cultural politics of everyday environmentalism. Drawing on Erving Goffman's theories of performance, sociologist Jessica Gullion (2015) coined the term to describe how fracking activists in Texas put emotions, fear, and suffering on public display to demonstrate the pain of living in a polluted region and thus gain recognition for their environmental claims. More colloquially, some media and cultural commentators have also used the phrase to emphasize the limits of small, individualized acts of behavior change to tackle big structural problems like climate change (Smith 2020). This more colloquial usage derives from the pejorative term performative activism, which dismisses social media slacktivism as ineffective and primarily about self-aggrandizement.

My encounters in Bengaluru have convinced me that we need another way of thinking about performative environmentalism. Performative environmentalism offers a way for ordinary people and nonexperts to establish ecological legitimacy, which is the moral authority to claim that one is doing right by the environment and can speak for the environment.<sup>3</sup> Individuals, acting collectively, perform environmental practices to demonstrate themselves as legitimate environmental stewards. They usually perform environmental practices because they are motivated by environmental concerns. But the manner in which they validate their own and each other's' environmentalism is modulated by status pressures operating within a rigid class order. Performative environmentalism should not be understood as a feint to maintain status by those engaging in it, or as a ruse to cloak class-based priorities as issues of the common good. It is sincere, driven by genuine feelings, and ideologically informed. It *nevertheless* reproduces inequities because what precisely becomes recognized and validated

as an environmental practice is contingent on the class/caste position of the person performing the practice, what the practice looks like, and how it is discussed.

Cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 2002) concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and distinction offer a useful framework for exploring the relational poverty politics of performative environmentalism. When everyday so-called green consumption practices as performed by high-cultural-capital consumers become the dominant means of establishing ecological legitimacy in the city, working-class groups who do not embody the same "feel for the game" are denied ecological legitimacy *even if* they do the very same practices in their everyday lives. Green lifestyle communities in Bengaluru perpetuate an antipoor sustainability through class-based distinction practices that portray only well-to-do sustainability practitioners as ecologically legitimate, othering the poor and deepening stigmas over poverty. Thus, even when the middle classes problematize environmental crises as emerging from unchecked consumerism and wish to change their behaviors to ameliorate these issues, their sociocultural biases and status anxieties render their environmentalism exclusive, casteist, antipoor, and, ultimately, ineffective at challenging the very economic orders they critique.

Repeated calls for sustainable consumption the world over have not led to a shift away from consumerist lifestyles. Rather, new forms of greenwashing are the norm. Political scientist Peter Dauvergne (2016) calls this the *environmentalism of the rich*, emerging from the traditions of moderate Western environmentalism and reflecting commodifying, co-opting, and individualizing effects of neoliberal capitalism on radical environmental movements. My articulation of performative environmentalism helps us understand why environmentalism of the rich has become the dominant expression of environmentalism in the twenty-first century, and consequently why several decades of local activism have failed to deliver absolute reductions in resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, *even when people have good intentions*. This failure is due to the aesthetic and performative biases and exclusions of sustainable communities, historically grounded and reinforced as they are by everyday performances that grant ecological legitimacy unevenly. By being accessible only to high-cultural-capital groups, these performances marginalize the voices of those most affected by the status quo of consumer capitalism and apply a green veneer to problems of overconsumption and environmental injustice.

### Individualized Sustainability and the Question of Consumption

Purchasing eco-certified products, using reusable shopping bags, installing solar panels, commuting on bicycles, and other green lifestyle practices are now integral to the repertoire of the eco-aware in global cities. Even the mainstream United Nations Sustainable Development Goals now emphasize sustainable consumption. The fields of behavioral economics, social psychology, and green marketing have developed a sophisticated literature on the conditions under which people buy green products and modify their energy, food, and mobility choices. Corporate, community, and state-led initiatives aimed at modifying consumption behaviors through education and behavioral nudges are increasingly common, particularly in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

While the individualization of environmental responsibility is problematic because it shifts the focus away from institutions and policy, there is also a growing consensus that everyday consumption is a key domain for sustainability action.<sup>5</sup> People of high socioeconomic status have disproportionate influence in locking in energy-driven greenhouse gas emissions through their household consumption and their investments (Nielsen et al. 2021). Growth in affluence has increased resource use and emissions faster than can be mitigated by technology (Wiedmann et al. 2020). The message is clear: the global “polluter elite” need to cut back on their lifestyle emissions (Kenner 2019). Despite this, governments and businesses continue to promote the expansion of consumption to keep GDP growing. Robust consumer spending is key to economic growth and stability in capitalist economies, a reality that sits uncomfortably alongside the moral implications of affluence-driven climate change. Extensive waste/wasting is also essential to growth-focused capitalist economies because today’s waste serves as tomorrow’s profit frontier.<sup>6</sup>

Escalating consumerism in places like Bengaluru is a global and local environmental issue. A 2015 report published by the Global Inequality Lab shows that emerging countries make up one-third of the top 10 percent of greenhouse gas emitters in the world.<sup>7</sup> Criticism from the Global North about overconsumption in the rest of the world has the stench of hypocrisy as rich countries still account for most of the world’s carbon emissions. Yet, from 2000 to 2015, the carbon emissions of the elite and middle classes of emerging countries grew more than those of any other group, reflecting their increased incomes and access to global markets and consumer goods.

Growth-boosters like McKinsey celebrate these growth trajectories, arguing that the globalization of Western lifestyles is good for economic stability and a buffer against the slowdown of consumer spending in the Global North (Ablett et al. 2007).

My family is a case in point. My father was a civil servant, my mother a journalist. My parent's occupations, caste, education, and income of 4,000 rupees a month placed us firmly within the middle classes in 1986, when I was born. Back then, we lived in a 700-square-foot government flat. The only household appliances of note were a mini-refrigerator and our *mixie* (blender), both wedding gifts. My mother and father eventually bought mopeds—two-stroke motorbikes popular in Chennai. Sometimes, the four of us would pile onto my father's moped to go visit relatives in other parts of town. I would stand in the front, ensconced between my father's legs, while my mother rode pillion, holding my infant brother in her arms.

We acquired our first family car in 1992, a secondhand Fiat 500 bought for 45,000 rupees, after taking a loan from a family member. Ten years later, we upgraded to a new Maruti 500, taking advantage of the expanded availability of credit in liberalizing India. In 2001, we bought a washing machine, one that I would wake up at 6 a.m. to use, as that was the only time we had running water during the summer months. In 2002, we bought a PC for my mother to use for her new job as an editor of an online newspaper. In 2005, my parents installed our first air-conditioning unit.

In 2022, my parents still live in a two-bedroom flat, but it is replete with not one, not two, but five air conditioners, a large refrigerator, a washing machine, a microwave, a coffeemaker, two air purifiers, a laptop, two tablets, and several other small gadgets. Global brands like LG, Samsung, and Whirlpool are well represented in their home, a far cry from the Indian-made Godrej fridge of my early childhood. Year after year, my father's income kept rising as the Indian government adjusted pay scales. The online news revolution boosted my mother's income. The fruits of their labor and luck? Five air conditioners working tirelessly in the summer months to keep them cool and comfortable. And while their footprint remains modest in comparison to my own living in a centrally heated apartment in California, it certainly towers over that of their household help, who live in a nearby slum.

India's economic growth, defended vigorously at every global climate summit as crucial to alleviating poverty, has benefited dominant-caste, middle-class, urban Indians more than any other social group (Oxfam International

2019). My educated and securely employed family's fortunes have improved with economic liberalization, but many poor Indians, whether rural or urban, have not seen their incomes increase. Income inequality has grown during thirty-five years of neoliberal, market-oriented development policy, producing an uneven distribution of emissions. India's emissions inequality is laid bare in the findings of a 2021 study measuring consumption-based carbon footprints across income classes: high-expenditure households emit seven times as much carbon as low-expenditure households (Lee, Taherzadeh, and Kanemoto 2021).<sup>8</sup> The damning conclusion is that India is "hiding behind the poor" in shirking its climate obligations, just as Global North countries deflect blame onto India and China to evade their historical climate obligations (Chakravarty and Ramana 2012; Dubash 2013).

Locally, consumerism depends on and justifies the creation of spaces and infrastructures that support elite and middle-class consumption, just as those same structures threaten the livelihoods of India's more numerous urban poor. Consumption by India's highest-emitting classes—even the "sustainable" sort—produces local environmental impacts, most evident in the form of solid waste, air, and noise pollution. The urban poor are disproportionately exposed to these local environmental costs, compounding the injustice of economic inequality. An elite consumer can ride around in an air-conditioned car or buy air purifiers to protect themselves from the air pollution produced by increased car and truck traffic, but slum dwellers do not have the same recourse. The discards of urban consumerism are carted off to peri-urban dumps, poisoning the land and water of Dalit and poor communities.

### **Ecological Citizenship, Eco-Privilege, and the Othering of the Poor**

But people like Swamy are trying to buck this trend. For him, living in a house that is built to last only twenty-five years (he plans to let the land rewild after), eschewing private cars, and composting his waste is part of prefiguring an alternative way of living in the city beyond consumerism.<sup>9</sup> Swamy's endeavors are not solely focused on changing his own behaviors. Instead, it is evident from his efforts to spread the word about his low-carbon life through talks, his website and blog, and the work he does in his neighborhood promoting zero-waste practices, that Swamy is engaged in a collective project of remaking life and reimagining progress. People



like Swamy who have decided to become more sustainable see themselves as citizens who are contributing to better cities and better planets. It is an expression of ecological citizenship.<sup>10</sup>

Bengalureans who are giving up their cars to ride bicycles and quitting well-paying jobs to grow organic food are quite different from the new middle-class consumer idealized by neoliberal India. The neoliberal middle-class consumer is not only economically productive, but also a reliable consumer of every commodity globalized India has to offer. A mutually constitutive relationship between consumption practice and class identity is key to contemporary formulations of India's middle classes as a class-in-practice, which political scientists Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller describe "as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position" (2006, 497).<sup>11</sup>

Bengaluru's elite cyclists, organic food growers, and zero-waste practitioners, like their counterparts in the United States and Europe, are overwhelmingly high-cultural-capital consumers embodying what Carfagna et al. (2014) term an emerging high-cultural-capital eco-habitus that is central to their identity projects and strategies for claiming status and distinction. Eco-habitus, an evolution of high-cultural-capital consumption repertoires, has developed in response to the scale and severity of global environmental crises.<sup>12</sup> The emergence of high-cultural-capital eco-habitus could be seen as a positive development for planetary health. If high-cultural-capital individuals see green consumption as an integral part of what people like them do and care about, then high-culture consumption might become less resource and carbon intensive over time. If Bengaluru's new middle classes, who other social groups seek to emulate (Ramakrishnan et al. 2020), were to make judgments using ecological criteria, use discourses of ecological impact, and deploy an ecological consciousness, sustainable ways of living might become the vogue across India. This is the promise of sustainable consumption: that it is both integral to and generative of broader social transformation.

Critics argue that the enthusiasm for green consumption is misplaced, that the rhetoric and practices of middle-class sustainability distract from more systematic critiques or radical challenges to the neoliberal economic and political order.<sup>13</sup> Its most ardent detractors describe green consumerism as a kind of greenwashing that sustains economic growth and extractive capitalism. Its proponents, meanwhile, have sought to redeem green lifestyle

politics by pointing out that collectively coordinated consumption strategies offer a way for consumers to do politics by “voting with their dollars” or by prefiguring alternative ways of living (Schlosberg and Craven 2019). I offer a different perspective. The reason that well-intentioned sustainable consumption becomes easily co-opted by capitalism is because of its performative and aesthetic biases that favor elite and upper-middle-class participation in environmental politics over that of other social groups. The biases are sociocultural, deeply embedded in the organization of everyday life.

Performative environmentalism is a regime that inadvertently excludes the working poor from participating in environmental politics, further eroding their rights to the city. In making this claim, I am drawing on insights from relational poverty studies, which argue that poverty should be understood relationally (Elwood, Lawson, and Sheppard 2017). Poverty is not a product of individual failure, but rather it is constituted by sociocultural and political-economic structures and reproduced through everyday practices. The antipoor aspects of performative environmentalism are on stark display in Bengaluru, where such green practices as growing food, segregating waste, or commuting by bicycle are quotidian, livelihood-generating activities among India’s poor and working classes. Yet these vernacular practitioners of sustainable lifestyles are rarely acknowledged as environmental actors. They are not invited to participate in green consumption communities, and certainly not to give lectures.

Deconstructing the conditions of possibility for the practice of sustainable consumption, as well as the discourses associated with these practices, helps us understand why this is the case. The language of sustainable consumption assumes access to forms of privilege that allow consumption in the first place. To reduce consumption, one has to have been, at one time, consuming at a higher rate. For many elite environmentalists, doing green practices every day provides a sense of purpose and progress without challenging their class status and power. It is an everyday salve that soothes the ecological violence of the neoliberal economic order. Poor people cannot participate in this discourse because they lack access to the privileges that fuel its emotional meaning.

In Bengaluru, the performance of green as a high-status practice is directly enabled by class privilege and furthers class distinction. Sustainable consumption practitioners legitimize their bicycling, recycling, and gardening practices by actively distancing them from the livelihood practices of the

poor. In doing so, they *other* the poor, increasing the stigmas around poverty. When green consumption becomes seen as a high-cultural-capital practice, those who lack dominant cultural capital cannot perform greenness in the same way. They are consequently denied ecological legitimacy. An unquestioned embrace of performative environmentalism silences working-class and urban poor communities in urban environmental politics, the very constituencies most likely to have a critique of state and corporate capital and of neoliberal urban development policies.

In calling out the aesthetic and discursive biases that deny ecological legitimacy to working-class cyclists and waste pickers, it is not my intention to naturalize or valorize necessity-based environmentalism. Rather, it is to call out the specious nature of elite environmental claims, which become the basis of patronizing and disciplining poor people in the terrain of sustainability. It is performative environmentalism and neoliberal sustainability that ensure the naturalization and perpetuation of the environmentalism of deprivation because the performative sustainability of elites will always need the need-based sustainability of the poor to give its claims content.

### **Discursive Boundaries: The Ethical Elite**

Practices of distinction are key to maintaining middle-class identity: because the definition of “middle class” is ambiguous and malleable, those who want to claim this status actively seek to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, both on the street and within the home. From the other direction, identifying as middle class gives the elite and securely propertied the capacity to speak for the nation and city, as the social group to be relied on to advance what is good for everyone (Baviskar and Ray 2011). These practices of distinction depend on long-standing forms of caste, religion, and linguistic differences and on new forms of consumption. Consumption practices that maintain middle-class distinction are particularly visible in Bengaluru, where sprawling malls, gated communities, and car-clogged roads symbolize the new middle-class lifestyle. Practices of distinction include shopping in malls, wearing branded clothing, employing domestic workers within homes, and travel by car or motorcycles on city roads.

Bicycling and a commitment to zero waste disrupt two prominent practices of middle-class distinction. To compensate for these disruptions, the middle class invoke environmental discourses to separate *their* bicycling,

recycling, and composting practices from the quotidian practices of the poor. They simultaneously invest resources to make their bicycling and waste management practices *look* and feel quite different from those of the poor (see figure 1.1). In doing so, they create *defensive distinctions* that separate them from the poor and penurious working-class cyclist or recycler and the unethical, materialistic middle classes. They fashion an identity that is simultaneously ethical and elite, enhancing their ecological legitimacy while retaining class status.

Elite and ethical identities are constructed and maintained by deploying inherited and accumulated economic, social, and cultural capital. Following Bourdieu (1984), a person's social status in any given setting depends on how much access that person has to each of these capital types. Economic capital is defined in monetary terms, simply the resources that



**Figure 1.1**

Spandex cyclist and itinerant buyer. This picture captures two types of cyclists one might encounter in Bengaluru. On the left, a spandex-clad cyclist on a mountain bike on a recreational ride. On the right, a man who is carrying plastic buckets on an older bicycle. The second cyclist is likely an itinerant buyer, who goes from home to home, exchanging recycled plastic buckets for paper and glass scrap.

individuals can amass and deploy in their everyday practices. Bengaluru's ethical consumers enjoy lifestyles of comfort and convenience, enabled by high incomes obtained by jobs in IT or other well-paying sectors. Consequently, they can invest both time and money to make bicycling, urban gardening, waste management, and food consumption practices more safe, convenient, and status-affirming. For example, middle-class cycling evangelists go to great lengths to convince potential converts that becoming a cyclist would not come with loss of social status or reputation. Swamy explains:

People like me must start cycling. In my talks, I say, I'm like you. And normally I wouldn't be so immodest. I tell people I own my company; in the industry we are the top brand in India. I tell them all that to make them understand that—this guy is high up so why can't I cycle. Sadly, it is needed. Yes, I tell people that nobody has lost respect for me. I am well off in my industry and I give talks in industry meetings. It hasn't affected my company's brands and its ability to sell products.

By emphasizing how he, a person who has “made it,” has adopted cycling as his main form of commute without damage to his economic prospects, Swamy makes clear that it is the poor cyclist, not bicycling, that is low status. Once the bicycle has been separated from its association as the poor man's vehicle, it becomes appropriate for elite consumption. For middle-class cyclists, this means buying high-quality bicycles and specialized gear to make bicycle rides safer and more pleasant.

Studies of zero-waste, urban gardening, and organic food practices reveal similar dynamics. Zero-waste management practitioners, many of whom live in gated enclaves, invest in specialized composting solutions and recycling equipment to signal that their waste management practices are scientifically informed. Urban gardeners buy land in surrounding villages or have expansive terraces and balconies in their single-family homes to experiment with new ways of growing food (Frazier 2018; van Holstein 2019). Middle-class and elite consumers are investing economic resources both to make their green practice practicable and to make it look different from the necessity-oriented vernacular practices of the urban poor. In doing so, the stigmas associated with the practice recede.

Green practices like bicycling and zero waste are anchored in communities whose formation is facilitated not only in online social media spaces, but also in offline forums like neighborhood and apartment associations, workplaces, and social events. These communities are manifestations of social

capital.<sup>14</sup> Communities serve as critical sites for social learning, where skills and knowledge are shared, encouragement is provided, and successes celebrated. Communities also serve as boundary-making spaces.

In Bengaluru, green talk functions as boundary work on several levels. First, because these communities are exclusively middle class, they express their commitment to sustainability primarily in English, rather than the Kannada, Tamil, or Hindi preferred by the city's working-class groups (see also Erler and Dittrich 2020). Second, in these communities, people learn to talk about their eco-lifestyle in certain ways that perform ecological legitimacy. This environmental talk identifies an environmentally conscious person as someone who acts ethically not because they need to, but because they want to.

The following text, taken from the website of one of Bengaluru's most popular bicycling communities, reveals this dynamic:

It's a general notion in our country, when someone who spots a cyclist they feel He/She is cycling either for fun or they cannot afford to buy motorcycle/car but the same cyclist cycling with a Go Green-Tee can pass on a clear message that He/She is cycling for a cause. The print on the Tee is self-explanatory and doesn't require any briefing on the cause. YOU GET BACK U'R RESPECT WHILE U WEAR THIS GO-GREEN TEE & RIDE CYCLE.

The founder of this group is a first-generation Bengalurean who moved to the city from a small town to work in IT. His successful career increased his net worth substantially; at one point, he owned as many as six cars. He was a leader within his family and his community. He decided to become a cyclist to reduce his environmental footprint after seeing the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. Many people in his life met this decision with surprise and disapproval. When I interviewed him, he told me that the T-shirt was his way of combating the intense criticism he received when he first began to bicycle. He decided to market the T-shirt and build a movement to popularize bicycling in the city. By emphasizing that bicycling, for the middle classes, is a voluntary act, adopted not just for personal benefits like fitness but also for planetary stewardship, the practice is elevated to an ethical choice. By talking about "going green by going cycling," bicyclists also distinguish themselves from car drivers, whose continued patronage of automobiles they take as evidence of their apathy to environmental problems.

Green talk carefully distinguishes between those who engage in resource-conserving behaviors out of necessity and those who come to these acts out

of an ecological consciousness. This narrative, perhaps accidentally, downplays the fact that individuals who could take up these time-consuming green practices voluntarily had already amassed wealth and resources. One of my interviews, for instance, was with a woman in her mid-thirties who had left her IT job to look for work in the environmental sector:

**Manisha:** So you've been interested in environmental issues for a long time.

**S:** Yes, for a long time. And also the reason why it took me a while to break out of IT is the money factor. I did want that financial freedom. So then I realized I had enough, earned enough.

When S realized she had "earned enough" to be financially secure, she was able to downshift her life. She quit her IT job to start working for a bicycle store. Others I interviewed who had left their IT jobs to start eco-businesses or work in the nonprofit sector did so after either accumulating savings or owning property. Yet others relied on well-employed family members for financial security. Most of them had advanced training and were confident that they could find a job in the IT sector again at a push. Being able to say that one was doing these things not because one had to, but because one cared and wanted to, was key to middle-class, ethical environmentalist identity formation.

These distinctions were primarily defensive, in that they were not so much about enhancing social status within one's class group, but rather about not losing respect or face with family, friends, or colleagues. In a country where ownership of a car or motorbike is a marker of respectability and even marriageability, and engaging with waste is associated with caste stigma, taking up bicycling or recycling has social costs. Hence, it becomes all the more important to middle-class people to explain that their decisions are made out of choice and not necessity. They are not accidental environmentalists (Kennedy and Horne 2020).

A third form of symbolic capital, cultural capital, makes performances granting ecological legitimacy convincing.<sup>15</sup> Members of green consumption communities work as lawyers, managers, accountants, urban planners, researchers, and media professionals. Access to this expertise through kinship networks, educational networks, and neighborhood clubs helped bicycling and waste management practitioners gain more publicity for their activities (journalists and influencers), generate research and data to support their schemes (accountants and researchers), draft and pursue legal cases in the

courts (lawyers), and devise plans to improve bicycling and waste management infrastructure (urban planners).

Cultural capital in turn became a means of othering and distinction. Simply put, the capacity to talk of these practices as *environmental* practices, and to articulate their importance to planetary well-being, personal health, and the city was, in and of itself, a product of education. Zero-waste management practitioners drew on discourses, meanings, and symbols of global environmental protection, caring for city spaces, public interest, and citizenship to elevate their waste management practices as ethical, thereby distinguishing them from the types of recycling practiced by members of the urban poor. They also used technical language and scientific concepts to stabilize their practices as suitably modern and appropriate for a self-identified high-tech city. For example, new middle-class waste management practitioners were often found discussing the relative merits of aerobic versus anaerobic composting.

Similarly, a study of urban gardeners in Bengaluru found that middle-class gardeners position themselves as carriers of knowledge, sophistication, and new technologies, and in turn describe their hired gardeners as backward (van Holstein 2019). Non-middle-class members of the Vanniyakula Kshatriya caste, who far outnumber middle-class organic gardeners, carry out most of the urban farming in the city. However, they are not recognized as “good” urban agriculturalists because of their cost-necessitated use of pesticides and fertilizers (Frazier 2018). Another study looking at millet consumption and organic food shops argues that the resignification of millet as a lifestyle superfood, enacted through new ways of talking about its health benefits, created and maintained symbolic boundaries that excluded lower-middle-class people (Erler, Keck, and Dittrich 2020). This restyling of long-standing provisioning and consumption practices, such as the eating of millet, a food indigenous to the drought-prone Deccan plateau where Bengaluru is located, disassociates the practice from its rural and nondominant-caste origins. Although the motivations and anxieties that propel individuals to these forms of green consumption might be diverse, the outcomes are consistent: they reify an existing social order.

A global order that sees rising private consumption as a more important indicator of success than public wealth in turn encourages performative environmentalism. Elite claims to environmentalist status are backed up by corporate and capitalist agendas that welcome environmental campaigns



that leave political economy or the interests of capital unquestioned. In US cities, municipal governments promote community gardens, farmers markets, and bicycle lanes because they represent a form of “sustainability capital” that makes a neighborhood more attractive to wealthy, white residents, and therefore to real estate developers (McClintock 2018). This is what sociologist Miriam Greenberg (2013) calls “market-oriented” sustainability, a strategy to protect the conditions of capital accumulation in an ecologically unstable world by turning sustainability into a green-growth strategy. When cities develop bike and public transit infrastructure, the wealthy gentrifiers who move into these neighborhoods actually emit more carbon than those they displace, simply because of their higher consuming capacity (Rice et al. 2020). But regardless of their actual carbon footprints, it is the cycling techies and organic moms who are seen as sustainable, rather than the immigrants living five to a room, driving gas guzzlers to work from their suburban homes.

### **Aesthetic Boundaries: The World-Class City and the Garden City**

Performative environmentalism maintains class structures by drawing aesthetic as well as discursive boundaries.<sup>16</sup> These judgments of aesthetic value are not imposed on people per se, but rather on the spaces they inhabit, a form of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira 2014).

What types of spatial imaginaries animate these aesthetic judgments, and where do they come from? Elite visions of what the city should look like oscillate between preserving the green heritage of Bengaluru’s past and emulating world-class cities like Singapore. The “world-class city” is a dominant spatial imaginary among Bengaluru’s corporate classes, animating their environmental politics. Marked by such motifs as glass-fronted towers, paved walkways, and a high-tech metro system, the world-class aesthetic is most visible in the south and southeastern parts of the city that house tech companies and their workers. Its proponents, Bengaluru’s IT-entrepreneur class, whom Govind Gopakumar (2020) calls “Brand Bengaluru,” see livability as connected to modernity. Relatively new entrants to the city, these technocrats see Bengaluru’s redemption as dependent on the city’s expedient adoption of new ideas flowing through the global circuits of capital and people. Rendering the city world-class involves investments in urban infrastructure as well as discarding things and people that make the city look shabby, disorderly, or backward.

The aesthetics of the world-class city criminalize the activities of the poor when they encroach on public lands and waters, while ignoring elite illegalities such as tax evasion or building in ecologically sensitive areas (Ghertner 2015). The former look out of place, while the latter fit into the broader vision of what a “world-class city” is supposed to look, smell, and feel like (Truelove and Mawdsley 2011). The state, moreover, is eager to restrict environmental action to slum removal, cleaning up or preserving some green spaces, as these actions do not threaten its neoliberal growth agenda. The courts and urban planners use codes of appearance to permit environmentally destructive development that looks good and enhances the appearance of the world-class city at the expense of lakebeds, marshlands, and the slums that occasionally occupy these spaces.<sup>17</sup> Instead of authorizing development on the basis of compliance with existing regulations, planners take their cues from loud civil society groups, environmentalists, and the wish images of global urbanism to raze informal neighborhoods.

The eco-habitus of people like Swamy stands in tension with this imaginary of a world-class city. Instead, many members of these green lifestyle communities problematize the impacts that IT-led development has wrought on the city. Swamy continues:

Bangalore used to be a hub of art, Indie culture, and high technology in terms of defense. In a way, it had all the qualities of being a knowledge city. Something like Boston. But what happened is that there was an article in *New York Times* that called Bangalore Silicon Valley. So Bangalore is now called India's Silicon Valley because of that. It is essentially IT. IT sucks, it sucks up all the creativity. Good musicians or artists or poets or physicists are sucked into this industry. It's the money. And Bangalore essentially has become a huge IT hourly wage city. It is all making software products. . . . So this city has become all about what the IT industry needs, and about the infrastructure that is required to sustain IT. That's what the city is. There used to be a culture . . . but now there is a shift to a more materialistic mindset. We are basically measuring people by the size of their cars. . . . Physically there's a huge explosion of traffic. Sheer number of vehicles killing the facilities pedestrians need. To be a pedestrian, you need trees. To be a cyclist, you need trees. But cars don't need trees. They hit trees.

Swamy, like several other IT and ex-IT people I interviewed, expresses regret at how IT has changed the city, even though his own career has benefited from the IT boom.<sup>18</sup> While IT and other privileged workers acquire the success symbols of development and modernization, such as private automobiles and apartments in gated complexes, Bengaluru's crumbling

infrastructure groans under the weight of their aspiration. In turn, people who had already “made it,” like Swamy, sought to disentangle themselves from the consequences of their consumerism by advocating a low-carbon life. Instead, they want to revitalize what was once special about Bengaluru through their work, re-localizing their environmental imaginaries. For eco-oriented Bengalureans like Swamy, the dominant desired eco-aesthetic is that of the garden city.<sup>19</sup>

Comprising images of lush parks, lakes, tree-lined avenues, and walkers listening to the chirp of birds and breathing cool air during their evening strolls, this garden city imaginary sees Bengaluru as a city with and in nature, filled with sensible, educated, genteel people (Nagendra 2016). Indeed, one can still experience lush greenery in Bengaluru’s colonial core, in Cubbon Park, Lalbagh gardens, and in neighborhoods like Malleswaram and Basavangudi, where major roads are canopied by large flowering trees (Nagendra and Gopal 2010). IT-led development has denuded the city’s greenery, with trees felled for road-widening and metro-construction projects, angering environmentalists like Swamy. The older colonial and postcolonial middle classes of Bengaluru have long seen Bengaluru’s verdant greenery as its distinguishing factor, making the city more salubrious than most other Indian metropolises. But, like the world-class city, the garden city imaginary indulges in its own forms of aesthetic criminalization.

In her history of Bengaluru’s journey into metropolitan status, historian Janaki Nair (2005) highlights how this longing for a garden city draws on nostalgia for a time in which Bangalore was a “placid and restrained” paradise of wide, tree-lined streets and well-planned neighborhoods filled with respectable middle-class folk. Never mind that Bengaluru’s past as a middle-class garden city is as Nair puts it, a “mythicized past” rather than a material reality, a product of forgetting. The city has long been a site of trade and industrial production, home to a diverse group of nondominant-caste, non-Hindu populations. This imagination of and desire for a green past, present, and future is hardly limited to Bengaluru. Rather, as geographer Hilary Angelo (2021) convincingly demonstrates, parks and urban greening have been part of bourgeois subject formation in multiple places and time periods. “Green as good” is now in the very DNA of contemporary environmentalism.

In Bengaluru, middle-class eco-habitus is both constitutive of and constituted by appeals to the garden city. In postcolonial India, middle classness is expressed through practices that distinguish this class group from

the masses through associations with modernity, self-restraint, order, and rationality. To be middle class is to inhabit a place that is free from the pollutants that would mar this spatial and ideological order, whether those pollutants take the form of industrial activities, the poor, Dalits, or other oppressed castes. Today, new middle-class Bengaleans secure themselves in gated communities or in older neighborhoods like Malleswaram or Basavangudi with tree-lined streets, partially shielding themselves from Bengaluru's many industrial parks, commercial areas, and slums. Entry into these enclaves is controlled; maids enter through back gates. Watchmen keep undesirables out. The "help" have separate toilet facilities to maintain caste boundaries.

In these private spaces, the spatial imaginary of the garden city is partially realized, just as Bengaluru's parks and tree-lined avenues are sacrificed to widen roads and build transit systems. In a true perversion of ecological priorities, the "clean and green" aesthetic in posh neighborhoods like Koramangala, Sadashiv Nagar, or Malleswaram is maintained by dumping the city's trash in ecologically sensitive lakebeds, forests, and in *gommala* (public common) lands that abut peri-urban, oppressed-caste villages like Mavallipura, Mandur, and Bagalur. This enclave mentality of middle-class environmentalists can only be understood through an examination of caste in the city.

### Caste, Cleanliness, and Environmentalism

"Clean and green" is a common refrain in Indian cities, plastered on school boundary walls, street medians, and other public spaces. Cleanup campaigns conflate clean cities with sustainable or ecologically healthy cities. This discursive confusion fortifies the antipoor nature of middle-class environmental campaigns. Perceptions of cleanliness—and its converse, dirtiness—have long defined moral and spatial boundaries between social groups (Douglas 2003; Sibley 1995; Zimring 2017). Garbage and pollution, as well as the working-class livelihoods that are associated with them, are framed as threats to order and salubrity (Baviskar 2019b; Ghertner 2012). Enacting this so-called environmental agenda then demands the removal of people and things who do not conform to the dominant social group's notions of cleanliness, order, or beauty. From neighborhood-level cleanup and beautification campaigns to public interest litigations that seek to remove informal settlements, cleaning up and beautifying urban space is a key mode of realizing elite environmental imaginaries (Dürr and Jaffe 2010).

Understanding how “clean as green” aesthetics stand in for ecological protection requires a brief review of the history and dominant ideologies that underpin modern environmentalism in the West, as well as the ways that religion, caste, and environmentalism intersect in Indian cities. Dominant ideas of colonial environmentalisms have long equated ecological health with “natural beauty” and painted the “other” (the nonwhite, poor, savage, and so on) as the enemy of nature. This discourse positions the enlightened privileged as defenders of nature (Guha 1989; Merchant 2003). The writing and paintings of early preservationists, wilderness enthusiasts, and landscape artists was replete with connections between cleanliness, emptiness, and nature. This ideology constructs nature as beautiful yet fragile, too easily marred by people and their activities. This association of nature with emptiness and purity is one way that modern Western environmentalism was marked by the pervasive logics of white supremacy and imperialism. American environmentalism’s racist roots have in turn shaped global thinking about conservation (Kashwan 2020). Taking this broader swath of environmental history into account, we can see that aesthetics have long stood in as shorthand for what is environmentally desirable or sound.

This vein of environmentalism is also marked by forgetting and erasure. Such forgetting is key to constructing “desirable pasts” in environmental discourse, whether in the form of a Bengaluru as a mythicized garden city or an emerging eco-traditionalist discourse that paints Hinduism as inherently eco-friendly.<sup>20</sup> Eco-restoration projects in Indian cities seek to restore reservoirs and waterways back to “pristine pasts” and “original boundaries,” ignoring how socio-technical and natural processes combine to create urban socio-natures (Coelho 2020). As Amrita Sen and colleagues find through a study of lake restoration projects in Bengaluru, “What passes as ecological restoration projects in official documents is fundamentally oriented towards the creation of enclosed, upper-class spaces, overriding concerns over collective justice” (Sen, Unnikrishnan, and Nagendra 2021, 121). Aesthetic concerns tend to supersede the livelihood needs of local communities eking out a living at the waters’ edge and sometimes cloak more vicious prejudices.

Cleanliness is also a marker of modernity. Nationalist and developmentalist campaigns led by the Indian state have long framed garbage as the dangerous “other” of modernity, the opposite of order, salubriousness, and quality of life.<sup>21</sup> The Indian state uses the problem of waste to activate nationalist pride and contour claims to legitimate political citizenship. When Prime

Minister Modi grabbed a broom to metaphorically clean up India while launching the BJP government's flagship Swachh Bharat "Clean India" Mission in 2014, he suggested that "everyone" could do their bit to keep Indian cities clean and welcoming. Being clean and keeping clean in turn constructs notions of hygienic citizenship, where the model citizen is one who keeps themselves and their environment clean and orderly. Anyone caught unclean or sullyng the environment (which is usually the poor, as they are more likely to lack access to sanitation services) is to be disciplined into compliance (Doron 2016; Luthra 2018).

Cleaning up or protecting nature is not just about public space or wilderness, but also often about controlling people. Implementing "clean and green" politics can mean *discarding* populations as a technique of power (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 62). The fact that the groups targeted by these cleanup or conservation efforts in contemporary India are often Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or non-Hindus is no accident, as urban environmentalism is also dominated by perspectives that deny the enduring salience of caste and religion as a form of repression, oppression, and violence in India.

In India, the pervasive role of caste structuring urban ecologies compounds the work of "clean as green." The middle classes often absolve themselves of culpability for urban environmental degradation, instead displacing blame for pollution and garbage onto the urban poor and the diverse industrial sectors that employ them (Baviskar 2011). Caste is the indigenous mechanism of oppression that fortifies this move (Reddy 2021). Stigmatized castes are easy to blame because occupational caste structures leave them responsible for the dirty jobs, such as leather tanning or scavenging. As Mukul Sharma argues in his critical intervention on Indian environmentalism, "from village to city and temple to school, caste metaphors of pollution, impurity, and dirt dominate places and spaces through imaginaries of dangers posed by the presence of Dalits" (M. Sharma 2017b, 2).

Caste legitimizes an aesthetic approach to urban environmentalism by creating a social ecology that makes malodor, dirt, and filth the companion of some communities, just as it secures "clean and green" spaces for dominant-caste cultural and economic elites (Guru 2011, Lee 2017). Anthropologist Joel Lee and his interlocutors (2017) name the spatial arrangements that disproportionately funnel waste matter and its chemical and olfactory concomitants toward Dalit communities as environmental casteism, which parallels environmental racism in the United States and elsewhere (Pulido 2017).

Environmental casteism damages the health, opportunities, and well-being of oppressed caste communities. It is also unmindful of the horrors that caste-based occupations involve, such as the risk of death posed by manually cleaning sewers, a job that kills workers by drowning them in refuse (Shankar and Swaroop 2021). Practices of untouchability also inhibit the development of public culture and common goods accessible to all people (Rodrigues 2009). Instead, environmental casteism creates a segregated spatial-sensory order that is self-perpetuating, or as Lee (2017, 488) articulates “not only do we sense our place in the caste order when we breathe, but the spatial-sensory arrangement in which we live forges us into signs that replicate the order.” Compounding matters, Indian environmentalism, dominated as it is by Brahmins, has ignored caste in its analysis and instead naturalized the Hindu caste system as ecologically sound (Aiyadurai and Ingole 2021).

Elite-led cleanup campaigns often involve making *someone else* clean up the city (a point I elaborate in the following chapters). Though the middle classes might occasionally wear gloves, pick up a broom, and clean litter on a street in an expression of Gandhian commitment or consumer citizenship, these environmental campaigns critique and seek to reform existing municipal waste management systems, and particularly the people who work in them. Caste is part of these technologies of discipline, invoked to devolve toxic labor onto some, but not other, bodies, just as in other contexts, waste work is racialized and/or feminized work, carried out by refugees, migrants, religious minorities, and displaced populations (Doherty and Brown 2019). As we will see in later chapters, well-meaning efforts to clean up the root causes of garbage and pollution are belied by the often-unspoken reliance on and availability of caste and racialized labor as a dehumanizing infrastructure to externalize risk, toxicity, and pollution.

A “clean up to green up” agenda is ecologically suspect, as it mobilizes ecological arguments in a manner that isolates specific instances of waste or pollution from a broader consideration of environmental flows (Liboiron 2021; Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Environmental campaigns conflate cleaning up with ecological preservation and sustainability in a manner that pays scant attention to social relations or processes of spatial displacement.<sup>22</sup> These campaigns do not, in other words, address where waste actually ends up and or who has to deal with this waste. They rely on a double act of misrecognition: of the root causes of the environmental problem of waste and pollution, and of the lives and rights of the poor. Cleanup campaigns

criminalize slum dwellers, migrant laborers, and street vendors, even as they valorize the role of citizens beautifying and greening cities through behavior change and civic action.

This useful trick of using public and environmental nuisance laws to legitimize the violent removal of people from communal spaces is part of the playbook of environmental and civic activists in the United States as well. In Seattle, homeless encampments are targeted for removal under public nuisance laws, citing accumulated trash (Rufo 2019). Camp residents defend themselves, saying that their better-resourced neighbors use their homes as dumping sites for unwanted bulky household items (Barnett 2019). In San Francisco, residents of a wealthy neighborhood sued the city under the California Environmental Quality Act to stall the commissioning of a much-needed shelter. Their lawsuit argued that building the shelter would promote “open drug and alcohol use, crime, daily emergency calls, public urination and defecation, and other nuisances.” In city meetings, residents held up signs of needles and garbage, arguing that people without fixed homes were innately anti-civic and anti-environmental (Ho 2019). These campaigns operate on a simple rationale: if it looks dirty, it must be bad for the environment. And if you live near dirt, you cannot be an environmentalist.<sup>23</sup>

### **Rethorizing “Sustainable Consumption” as Performative Environmentalism**

Why do cultural elites such as India’s new middle classes have an easier time establishing ecological legitimacy than the poor? Repurposing the term performative environmentalism, I have argued that this is because, in neo-liberal late capitalism, dominant environmental discourses associate sustainability with specific aesthetic and discursive markers constituted by the preferences and possibilities of groups with intersecting forms of race, class, and caste privilege. The everyday practices most associated with green credentials involve spending time outdoors, keeping your surroundings clean and litter-free, recycling, bicycling, and buying organic food or carbon offsets. Performative environmentalism is thus only accessible to those who have either the surplus income to buy green products or the surplus time to take on laborious environmental practices. Power confers green.

Distinction and othering become a part of the performance of green behaviors because our economic order valorizes consuming power and stigmatizes poverty. Green consumers’ approach to investing in sustainability contributes



to the othering of the poor and further stigmatizes poverty. Their actions are not always intended to exclude, but their defensive distinctions are key to stabilizing sustainability practices that are associated with poverty and precarity within the existing economic order. In doing so, performative environmentalism reinscribes class, caste, and race divisions. In this way, and despite good intentions, performative environmentalism becomes an alibi for global capital, perfectly compatible with a world that sees compound economic growth as the prerogative for organizing social, economic, and political life.

At the same time, enacting green consumerism is a means for the new middle class and elites to acquire and leverage power. Doing green things, via ethical consumption, is a way of acquiring social status (Barendregt and Jaffe 2014). Doing green things out of preference as opposed to necessity confers power in the form of moral authority (Kennedy and Horne 2020). Moral authority enables groups to speak for the common good, giving them what geographer Laura Pulido calls ecological legitimacy. Ecological legitimacy turns into political power, enabling some groups to exert influence on political processes that affect shared environments. Citizens who have achieved ecological legitimacy can claim to speak for the collective good and influence public policy, to the exclusion and harm of the presumed “non-ecological” poor. Green confers power.

Individualizing and lifestyling environmental action systematically hides the gendered, raced, classed, and ability-based possibilities and preferences of performing sustainability. It pretends that everyone has access to these environmental practices and then stigmatizes those who do not enact them as either ill-informed or uncaring. It turns a structural problem into a moral one. If children from low-income communities of color in the United States are found eating processed fast food instead of kale chips, their caregivers are held up to scrutiny, the racist assumption being they are not taught the value of fresh, organic food at home (Anguelovski 2015). Neither the uneven distribution of grocery stores and farmers markets produced by historical and contemporary neighborhood segregation, nor the exclusionary nature of progressive food movements that center whiteness, are invoked in the casual but influential theorizing of (white) armchair environmentalists (Alkon 2012; Guthman 2008). Dominant sustainability discourses that are embedded in and reflect casteist, racist, and antipoor epistemologies also render invisible the healthy and sustainable food practices of marginalized groups. Instead, these communities are targeted by

college service-learning programs for environmental education and community gardening interventions, the assumption being that the poor and people of color just do not know enough to do the right thing (Malier 2019).

In urban India, this antipoor environmental ideology dominates discussions of sustainability. It construes the livelihoods of the poor as problematic, while turning away from the overconsumption, entitlements, illegal behavior, and immoralities of the rich. This is a capitalism-friendly environmentalism that seeks the removal of cows and street vendors from roads but does not ask why malls are built on marshlands or why agricultural lands are commandeered for the construction of highways. Slum dwellers are often unable to keep their surroundings litter-free because municipal waste collection services do not serve their neighborhoods, but these structural factors are ignored in conversations that frame the poor as lacking the appropriate dispositions for good environmental behaviors. Sometimes, as when informal settlements are razed to the ground to make way for an eco-park, antipoor environmentalism turns violent.<sup>24</sup> A commonsense, subtle, and insidious orientation that sees elite environmental claims as more legitimate than others undergirds these more spectacular instances of green dispossession.

Performative environmentalism is the everyday expression and legitimating structure of a form of neoliberal sustainability that seeks to solve socio-ecological crises with recycling, retrofits, educational campaigns, and feel-good consumption. However, as chapter 2 contends, everyday environmentalism can also be a gateway to greater political engagement in urban ecologies. When the women of Bengaluru's ecologically conscious middle class became frustrated with the lack of infrastructure and policy support for their eco-practices, they formed community organizations and engaged in political advocacy to change the material and social contexts of their everyday lives. Does performative environmentalism leave room for political action on environmental issues? And are the social groups who are excluded from sustainable communities able to rearticulate their environmental claims in a manner that is more legible and legitimate within this performative environmental order? The subsequent chapters explore these questions.



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