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Is it sustainable consumption or performative environmentalism?

Manisha Anantharaman

Abstract

What are the cultural politics of what becomes recognised as sustainable consumption and consequently good environmental citizenship? And how does this contour who is able to participate in urban environmental politics? In this article, I draw on Bourdieusian theories of distinction to explore the links between (sustainable) consumption, moral authority and participation in environmental politics in Bangalore, India. I re-theorise the term performative environmentalism to argue that when the new middle classes successfully claim cultural authority over sustainable consumption, it obscures the daily environmental practices of the poor in a manner that further disenfranchises their already tenuous right to the city and its environments. This analysis connects the study of consumption practices to scholarship on *just sustainabilities* by exploring the relational poverty and class politics of sustainable consumption. By focusing on how sustainability and poverty discourses articulate with each other, I show that performative environmentalism exacerbates the exclusion of the working poor from participation in environmental politics by reinforcing class inequalities, restigmatising poverty and monopolising ecological legitimacy for higher status groups. Doing so, I connect cultural and practice-based studies of green consumption to broader questions about how inequality is reproduced in neoliberalising cities through everyday practices.

Keywords: [class](#); [cultural politics](#); [India](#); [inequality](#); [sustainable consumption](#)

Introduction

The challenge of (over)consumption is increasingly central to the climate conversation ([Creutzig et al, 2018](#); [Dubois et al, 2019](#); [Castano Garcia et al, 2021](#)). Research suggests that intensifying consumption among the affluent, actively encouraged in capitalist, growth-driven economies, is the strongest accelerator of greenhouse gas emissions, and that affluence has increased resource use and emissions faster than mitigatable by

technology ([Wiedmann et al, 2020](#)). This implies that the global 'polluter elite' need to change how they eat, move about, live and invest their money, which will necessitate structural transformations to the economy ([Kenner, 2019](#); [Nielsen et al, 2021](#)). While most 'polluter elites' are located in the global North, the emergence of a transnational class of cosmopolitan consumers whose lifestyles have more in common with people living in the United States and Europe than with fellow Asians, Africans and Latin Americans has globalised the problem of (un)sustainable consumption ([Alfredsson et al, 2018](#)). For instance, from 2000 to 2015, the middle and upper classes of emerging countries grew their carbon emissions more than any other group ([Chancel and Piketty, 2015](#)), reflecting their increased incomes, access to global markets and consumer goods, and aspirations to live lives of material opulence ([Bhar et al, 2022](#)). Tackling unsustainable lifestyles has become a global priority ([Newell et al, 2021](#)).

Over the past 20 years, scholars have conceptualised consumption through diverse theoretical approaches – from behavioural economics and social psychology to social practice theory and cultural anthropology – much of it towards the normative goal of making consumption more sustainable ([Middlemiss, 2018](#)).¹ Broadly, sustainable consumption is a research and policy field concerned with reducing the ecological impacts of consumption. But as David [Evans \(2018\)](#) writes about the concept of consumption more broadly, contemporary sociological scholarship invoking the term is often unclear on what exactly constitutes sustainable consumption.² In this article, I focus on an understudied question – what are the cultural politics of what becomes recognised as sustainable consumption and consequently good environmental citizenship? And how does this contour participation in urban environmental politics?

I turn to Bangalore,³ India's high-tech hub and self-appointed 'Silicon Valley', to explore these questions. Cities like Bengaluru are fertile ground to explore the cultural and democratic politics of sustainable consumption because they harbour populations with widely varying consumption footprints, reflecting socioeconomic inequality. Here, cosmopolitan consumers driving cars, shopping in malls and taking international vacations live alongside the more numerous poor who still lack the material resources needed for wellbeing. Moreover, the urban has emerged as a key scale for sustainability and climate action, with cities across the world adopting ambitious plans to green infrastructures, spaces and lifestyles ([Bulkeley, 2013](#); [Wachsmuth et al, 2016](#)). Urban sustainability and decarbonisation are key terrains to negotiate questions of urban rights and belonging.

Bengaluru, a city of ten million, is home to a substantial number of households that consume at levels that place them within the global consuming classes ([Pani et al, 2010](#); [Gopakumar, 2020](#)), and whose consumption is implicated in a range of local and global environmental problems. Responding to environmental crises, a growing number of these well-heeled 'new middle class' Bengalureans are modifying their shopping habits and household practices to become more 'sustainable'. Since the late 2000s, the city has become an incubator for eco-lifestyle practices, with vibrant communities emerging around bicycling, organic food consumption, urban gardening and zero waste management. These eco-lifestyle practices bear strong resemblance to what is prevalent among high-cultural-capital consumers in the United States and Europe. Interestingly, these practices are also common among Bengaluru's poor and working classes, who grow food, cycle to work and reclaim resources from waste to make a living. In Bengaluru, one can witness the environmentalism of the rich and poor side by side.

Leveraging this setting, I draw on Bourdieusian theories of distinction to explore the links between (sustainable) consumption, moral authority and participation in environmental politics. I re-theorise the term performative environmentalism to argue that when the new middle classes successfully claim cultural authority over sustainable consumption, it obscures the daily environmental practices of the poor in a manner that further disenfranchises their already tenuous right to the city and its environments. My analysis connects the study of consumption practices to scholarship on just sustainabilities ([Agyeman and Evans, 2003](#); [McLaren and Agyeman, 2015](#)) and to political-economic analyses of the role of capitalism in co-producing both inequality and ecological harm ([Fraser, 2021](#)) through a relational study of poverty and inequality. Relational theorists of poverty argue that poverty and privilege are mutually constituted ([Elwood et al, 2017](#)).⁴ Examining how green lifestyle activism frames and engages 'poor others', I connect cultural and practice-based studies of sustainable consumption to broader questions about how inequality is reproduced in neoliberalising cities through everyday practices. Focusing on how sustainability and poverty discourses articulate with each other, I show that performative environmentalism exacerbates the exclusion of the working poor from participation in environmental politics by reinforcing class inequalities, restigmatising poverty and monopolising ecological legitimacy for higher status groups.

This article is organised as follows. First, I present the conceptual framework, linking consumption with ecological legitimacy in the context of class inequality. Next, I introduce the term performative environmentalism. I then provide a brief overview of the data and methods before presenting findings. The article concludes with some speculative thinking on the implications of performative environmentalism for ecological sustainability and social equity.

Conceptual framework

Ecological legitimacy and urban environmental politics

Who has the power to speak for the environment? Geographer Laura Pulido uses the term ecological legitimacy to describe the moral authority to speak for the environmental good (Pulido, 1996). Moral authority is a form of power that arises from the belief or perception that relevant actors act in ethically sound or pro-social ways, and are therefore deserving of trust and support (Griskevicius et al, 2010). According to Pulido (1996: 37) ecological legitimacy attaches itself to a group 'when its commitment to preserving the environment is not seen as suspect'. Being perceived as a valid environmental actor in turn empowers groups to participate in environmental governance and exert influence on political processes that affect shared environments. Simply put, being seen as green confers power and privilege.

There are many routes to acquiring ecological legitimacy. Claims to Western scientific expertise serve as one reliable option, particularly in policy-making spaces (Gullion, 2015). But for ordinary non-experts, ecological legitimacy is often both predicated on the sociological characteristics of the group (race, class, gender, ethnicity), as well as what the group does or is perceived as doing. Modern environmentalism has accrued certain economic and cultural markers that map onto specific identities (Taylor, 2002). The Western origins of environmentalism as a global movement has led to the dominance of cultural elites (White, male, upper/middle-class, upper-caste, able-bodied) within the environmental movement (Dauvergne, 2016). Consequently, individuals and social groups who map onto these identities have an easier time establishing ecological legitimacy and participating in environmental politics. On the other hand, research across diverse geographical contexts shows that ecological legitimacy often eludes working-class and poor populations (Pulido, 1996; Guha, 2017; Pearson et al, 2018; Baviskar, 2019; Bell, 2019). A long tradition of ecological scholarship asserted that landless and poor rural populations do not care about

protecting the environment ([Zimmerer, 1993](#); [Baviskar, 2005](#)). While environmental justice movements contest this racist and classist trope, in urban India, the poor continue to be blamed for environmental nuisances ([Baviskar, 2011](#)).

Since the 1990s, wealthy, propertied social groups in Indian cities have identified informal settlements and enterprises as the reason why rivers are choked with garbage, or the air is polluted. Working through the courts and planning authorities, they have used these 'environmental' arguments to advocate for the 'green dispossession' of the poor and working classes from the city ([Mawdsley, 2004](#); [Arabindoo, 2005](#); [Doshi, 2019](#)). Amita Baviskar names this form of environmental mobilisation 'bourgeois environmentalism', critiquing the ways in which propertied groups use environmental discourses to advance their class-based interests of living in cities that match their aesthetic preferences ([Baviskar, 2011](#)). Bourgeois environmentalism is not unique to India. Public and environmental nuisance laws have been used to legitimise the violent removal of people from cities in the United States as well. In Seattle, homeless encampments are targeted for removal under public nuisance laws, citing accumulated trash. Camp residents try to defend themselves, saying that their better-resourced neighbours use their homes as dumping sites for unwanted bulky household items ([Barnett, 2019](#)). In San Francisco, residents of a wealthy neighbourhood sued the city under the California Environmental Quality Act to stall the commissioning of a much-needed shelter. 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](#)). 'Environmentalists' in the western United States argued for a proposition to restrict immigration on environmental grounds, claiming that the population increases from immigration were a driving cause of planetary destruction ([Park and Pellow, 2011](#)). Such arguments are only persuasive because so many 'sustainability advocates' underplay how the hyper-consumption and the luxury lifestyles of the wealthy, and the locked-in high-consumption lifestyles of the global middle classes, drive unsustainability ([Wiedmann et al, 2020](#); [Nielsen et al, 2021](#)). Indeed, one could surmise that these sorts of claims by elites to ecological legitimacy always require undermining the environmental claims of the poor and racialised others by blaming them for environmental problems. Just as in turn, corporations and governments scapegoat consumers for ecological destruction, willfully obfuscating their own role and culpability ([Akenji, 2014](#)).

In cities across the world, this anti-poor environmental ideology dominates. It construes the livelihoods of the poor as problematic while turning away from the overconsumption, entitlements and illegalities of the rich. This is capitalism-friendly environmentalism that seeks the removal of cows and street-vendors from Indian roads but does not ask why malls are built on marshlands or why agricultural lands are commandeered for the construction of highways (Baviskar, 2011; Ghertner, 2012). Slum-dwellers are often unable to keep their surroundings litter-free because municipal waste collection services do not serve their neighbourhoods (Luthra, 2018). However, these structural factors are ignored. Instead, they are framed as lacking the appropriate dispositions for good civic and environmental behaviour (Doron, 2016). The informal settlements where the working poor live are territorially stigmatised as unclean and razed to the ground, only to be replaced with shopping malls and gated enclaves that serve profit-making prerogatives of real-estate developers and the consumption desires of the well-off (Arabindoo, 2005; Coelho, 2020).

This background section on the contours of ecological legitimacy in cities shows that the poor and working classes are often seen as ecologically suspect just as cultural and economic elites have an easier time establishing ecological legitimacy. In the next section, I articulate the links between consumption and social status in neoliberalising India. In neoliberal cities, conspicuous consumption serves as a source of social status because consuming power is associated with economic development and social progress. This is due to the role that consumerism plays in the broader nationalist and capitalist project of growth and development.

Green consumption and social status in a neoliberal world

Neoliberal capitalism promotes and thrives on consumerism (Paulson et al, 2020; Brand and Wissen, 2021). Neoliberal logics construct India's propertied consuming classes, its 'new middle classes' as central to the nation's development imaginaries (Fernandes, 2000a; 2000b). State and corporate interests hail their conspicuous consumption practices as evidence of India's economic success post-liberalisation (Ablett et al, 2007; Jaffrelot and van der Veer, 2008). Dominant logics of urban planning and spatial development privilege private consumption, constructing highways for private automobiles, shopping malls for brand-conscious consumers while sacrificing parks and public spaces to make way for gated enclaves (Voyce, 2007; Gopakumar, 2020). Indeed, consumerism depends on and justifies the creation of spaces and infrastructures that cater to the lifestyles of the well-off as opposed to livelihoods for

the more numerous urban poor, who in turn aspire to consumption, belonging and mattering themselves (Gago, 2017; Ramakrishnan et al, 2020). Conversely, those who do not yet consume do not have the same value in the eyes of the state, especially as neoliberal stigma frames poverty as a problem of individual failure as opposed to structural inequalities (De Souza, 2019). This discursive and material valorisation of the new middle-class consumer-citizen has occurred alongside the displacement of subaltern urban residents from urban imaginaries and spaces (Bhan, 2009; Gidwani and Reddy, 2011). What emerges is a citizenship regime that empowers propertied, upper-caste individuals to see themselves as stewards of the city, and seek to reshape urban space to suit their tastes and preferences (Anjaria, 2009).

In the neoliberal city, social status is embedded in and conveyed through consumptive and consequently political power, and articulated through public and private practices of distinction (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Baviskar and Ray, 2011). 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, that is 'as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position' (Fernandes and Heller, 2006: 497). This practice-based conception of class, drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field*, theorises how class structures are reproduced by social groups through everyday practices.⁵ Habitus, systems of dispositions that are characteristic of different social classes, is first shaped in the intimate context of the home where individuals are socialised into certain ways of being and interacting with the world while also acquiring skills and cultural competencies. The social field (such as educational institutions or workplaces) is the setting where these skills and dispositions are deployed and strengthened. Individuals thus build cultural capital, the combination of values, tastes, cultural goods and qualifications that one acquires by being in a particular social class. Cultural capital, along with economic resources (economic capital) and social connections (social capital) together become the structural basis of class power and the means for creating and maintaining social distinction.

While the distinction strategies of most new middle-class Bangaloreans comprise resource-intensive consumption practices like driving cars, acquiring larger homes and travelling abroad, a subset engage in consumption practices that are identifiable as sustainable or environmental. This tracks with sociological and anthropological research on the cultural meanings of sustainable consumption which find that green

lifestyle practices are now associated with enhanced social status through distinction (Barendregt and Jaffe, 2014; Anantharaman, 2017; Kennedy and Horne, 2019). Carfagna et al (2014) identify an emerging high-cultural-capital 'eco-habitus', ecologically oriented high-status tastes that have become central to the identity projects and strategies for claiming status and distinction for high-cultural-capital consumers. Simply put, as environmental issues become more generally important, high-cultural-capital consumption repertoires shift to include environmental practices as a strategy of distinction.

As green lifestyles become more prominent in both the political and cultural milieu, examining the class politics of sustainable consumption is an important research agenda. Several studies have established that sustainable consumption and green lifestyle activism are predominantly performed by middle-class, highly educated and White individuals (Alkon, 2012; Anantharaman et al, 2019; Kennedy and Givens, 2019; Malier, 2021). But, what does the performance of green consumption by these groups mean for other social groups and for social inequality more generally?

For one, individualising environmental action through green lifestyles can hide the fact that doing environmentalism through green consumption is tied to gendered, raced, classed and ability-based possibilities and preferences (Anantharaman, 2018), that is, to structural inequalities reproduced in a capitalist economy. It can perpetuate a false impression that everyone has access to environmental practices and then stigmatise those who do not consume ethically as ill-informed or uncaring (Malier, 2019). For instance, if non-White children 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 that they are not taught the value of fresh, organic food at home (Anguelovski, 2015). The role that intersecting factors such as the uneven distribution of grocery stores and farmers' markets produced by historical and contemporary neighbourhood segregation, and the exclusionary nature of progressive food movements that centre Whiteness, is not readily acknowledged (Guthman, 2008; Alkon, 2012). Dominant Western/Anglo sustainability discourses carry unspoken assumptions about what counts as pro-environmental or sustainable, and thus invisibilise the healthy and sustainable food practices of non-Western marginalised groups (Head et al, 2019; MacGregor et al, 2019). In Bengaluru, the poor and working classes perform many of the same 'green' practices that have now become popular among the new middle classes. Yet, these vernacular sustainability practitioners are rarely

acknowledged as environmental actors and do not participate in green consumption communities. How come?

Performative environmentalism

To elucidate the connections between green lifestyles, moral authority and class politics, I re-theorise the term performative environmentalism. Performative environmentalism is already in the environmental lexicon. Sociologist Jessica Gullion 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 (Gullion, 2015). Performative environmentalism is also colloquially invoked in the popular media to critique the emphasis on small, individualised acts of behavioural change in the fight against big structural problems like climate change (Smith, 2020). This usage is derivative of the colloquial pejorative 'performative activism' that dismisses things like social media posts or 'woke' yard signs as more about self-serving impression management, rather than any sort of real commitment to social change. Both these formulations are directly (in the academic case) and indirectly (in the colloquial use) influenced by Erving Goffman's concept of impression management, which explains 'how people perform idealized versions of themselves to others emphasizing how they meet or surpass social expectation' (Hargreaves, 2016: 56).

Connecting but going beyond these formulations, I identify performative environmentalism as a way in which ordinary people and non-experts establish ecological legitimacy through performing everyday practices validated as ethical in the social setting they occupy. But the way in which they validate their own and each other's environmentalism is modulated by status pressures operating within a rigid class order. Like the two formulations described, I understand performative environmentalism as an interactionist process. However, I argue that it should not be understood as a feint to maintain status or save face. This environmentalism is driven by genuine feelings, ideologically informed and imbued in shared meanings.⁶ However, it reproduces inequities because what precisely becomes recognised and validated as an environmental practice is culturally mediated – it is contingent on the class position of the person performing the practice, what the practice looks like, how it is talked about, and the social setting of the practice.

For an everyday environmental practice to be considered performative environmentalism, it must grant the practitioner greater moral authority while not

causing a significant loss of social status. Thus, an individual giving up meat in a sociocultural context where such an act would only be met with derision and ridicule would not constitute performative environmentalism, and neither would giving up meat in a social context where this is seen as normal. In those contexts, the action does not have the emotional force that fuels its symbolic meaning. Green consumption becomes performative environmentalism when it is associated with pro-environmental behaviours that come to be seen as ethically good and socially desirable in a particular context, noting that these are always claims. In other words, recognition as 'pro-environmental' or 'high status' is not predetermined, but rather achieved through collective strategies at remaking the symbols and meanings associated with specific practices.

I draw on cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and distinction to explore the class politics of performative environmentalism ([Bourdieu, 1984, 2002](#)). I argue that when everyday green consumption practices as performed by high-cultural-capital consumers become a dominant means of establishing ecological legitimacy in the city, working-class groups who do not embody the same 'feel for the game' or 'eco-habitus' are denied ecological legitimacy even if they *do* the very same practices in their everyday lives. Green lifestyle communities in Bengaluru perpetuate an anti-poor sustainability through class-based distinction practices that portray only elite sustainability practitioners as ecologically legitimate, *othering* the poor, and deepening stigmas over poverty.

Examining the politics of green consumption through the lens of performative environmentalism can help us understand why and how in cities like Bengaluru, where the poor far outnumber the rich, expressions of the 'environmentalism of the rich' ([Dauvergne, 2016](#)) are more visible and considered more legitimate than the 'environmentalism of the poor' or 'vernacular sustainability' ([Greenberg, 2013](#)). Bengaluru's working poor cycle to work, grow food and reclaim recyclables from discards at rates much higher and more ecologically significant than its high-cultural-capital new middle classes. Yet, they are marginalised in urban environmental politics. Deconstructing the conditions of possibility for the practice of sustainable consumption, as well as the discourses associated with these practices, offers one explanation as to why.

Methods and evidence

The arguments in this article are based upon a decade-long research relationship with Bengaluru. First, I am from this milieu myself. I was born in the late 1980s in India, and I grew up in a middle-class household just beginning to embrace the plenitude of consumerism and in a city that was coming to terms with the externalities of rapid economic growth and development. Consumption in such a milieu was a primary tool of distinction and upward mobility, yearned for by families like mine that were looking to move out of lower-middle-class status via the acquisition and display of consumer goods like cars, cameras and refrigerators. At the same time, I witnessed and experienced degrading urban environmental quality. It was these contradictions that drove me to research consumption.

The individuals and communities I describe are part of the 'new middle class'. The term new middle class is generally used in the Indian context to refer to the 'high-cultural-capital' social groups, predominantly dominant caste, English-speaking and urban, who benefited from the economic liberalisation policies pursued in India in the late 1980s, and whose consumption patterns and practices are globalised. Further, the new middle classes are significantly more well-off than most of India. In terms of income and consumption, they are closer to what could be described as an elite or upper class. Thus 'new middle class' operates as much as a cultural construct as a sociological term – the discourses around middle classness are as important to their self-definition as how much they earn or what they buy ([Fernandes, 2000b](#)). For the elite and securely propertied, identifying oneself as middle class also gives one the capacity to speak for the nation and city, as the social group to be relied upon to advance what is good for everyone ([Baviskar and Ray, 2011](#)).

My research in Bengaluru began in 2010 and from 2011 to 2014 I conducted ethnographic research on green lifestyle practices in the city. This included 45 in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals who practise and promote bicycling, zero waste and organic gardening, supplemented with participant observation and online ethnography. Interviewees were identified and recruited through several channels: through a mailing list of a bicycling and zero waste community in Bangalore, Facebook posts, and through snowball sampling. Most interviews took place on a one-on-one basis either in the homes of respondents or in public settings like coffee shops. Interviews focused on asking participants to describe their practices, how they came to them, what materials and infrastructures they engage in their practices, and how their

families and friends have responded to these changes. I also asked interviewees about the advocacy actions they carry out to promote sustainable living in the city.

Previously, I have described how these green practices come to emerge and become stabilised in communities of practice (Anantharaman, 2014; 2017). Here, I draw on this previously published data to explore a particular question around how we understand 'sustainable consumption'. Therefore, my analysis focuses on practices of distinction and *othering*, and their consequences for ecological legitimacy. To this end, the interview data, ethnographic notes and social media conversations were coded qualitatively using Bourdieu's concepts of distinction, habitus, and cultural, economic and social capital, alongside generated categories of discursive boundaries, *othering*, and ecological legitimacy. To corroborate my findings, I also refer to more recent studies of green lifestyles in Bengaluru and other parts of India that identify similar dynamics of social distinction.

Findings: becoming ecological citizens and sustainable consumers

In Sadashiv Nagar, one of Bengaluru's most expensive central neighbourhoods, I meet Swamy in his eco-home. Swamy's story is illustrative of the contradictions of performative environmentalism. He is well-off. He is ideologically committed to environmental causes. He problematises the rampant rise of consumerism in the city. He is nevertheless embedded in a social milieu that constrains the strategies available to him to practice and promote the eco-practices he believes are needed to save the city and the planet. I intertwine Swamy's story with interview quotes and ethnographic insights from my field research to show how in Bengaluru, performing green as a high-status practice is directly enabled by class privilege, while furthering class distinction.

Swamy calls himself a "foodie, animal lover and environment nut". His family's home, built using waste and scrap materials, had recently been featured in an interior design magazine for its low-carbon, low-cost construction. He talked with pride about how the two toilets were outfitted with second-hand commodes obtained from a shop that reclaimed materials from demolished buildings. The roof was built with corrugated bamboo, the floor polished cement and most of the walls were windows. The home had no air-conditioning or heating, using passive cooling to deal with the warm

summer months. As we chatted, a monkey peered into the house. It was an idyllic setting, a stark contrast from dusty and loud city roads just a stone's throw away.

Swamy sees himself as an avowed and dedicated environmentalist. On his website, he has tips on how to reduce energy and water consumption. He is an engaging speaker with a sense of humour. Schools, colleges and corporate offices invite him to give talks on how to live an eco-friendly life in Bengaluru. In these professional and civic spaces, he is conspicuous, sporting a bicycle helmet and wearing shorts, what he calls his cyclist uniform. One of the first thing Swamy tells you when you meet him is that a bicycle is his primary mode of transport. He also occasionally uses autorickshaws and buses, but he almost never drives a car. He knows that this makes him stand out in a society where the car is a symbol of respectability and propertied citizenship ([Baviskar, 2011](#); [Gopakumar, 2020](#)).

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 12 years ago. When I hit 40, I hit sense and realised it doesn't make sense to add to the condition.'

The 'condition' Swamy is referring to is the automobilisation of the city and the degrading environmental quality he associates with it. New middle-class Bengalureans like Swamy are turning to green lifestyle practices for diverse reasons. Some are growing food on rooftops and balconies to avoid pesticides and chemical fertilisers in commercially grown food ([Frazier, 2018](#)). Others see growing food as an act of resilience and self-reliance in an unstable economy and urban ecology ([van Holstein, 2019](#)). Composting and recycling emerged as ways to take back control over Bengaluru's garbage woes by tackling the problem at home ([Ganguly and Lutringer, 2017](#)). 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 traffic-choked roads on a bicycle ([Anantharaman, 2017](#)). Families avoid pre-packaged meals or prevent food waste because it has always been in their traditions to eat fresh food every day ([Ganguly, 2017](#)).

Many also connect their desire to change how they consume to a broader analysis of how the city has been ruined by consumer capitalism and corporate globalisation. Swamy tells us more:

'Bangalore used to be a hub of art, indie and high technology. In a way, it had all the qualities of being a knowledge city. ... 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 [information technology]. 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's all making software products. ... So, the city has become all about what the IT industry needs, and about the infrastructure required to sustain IT. 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 people interviewed, articulates regret at how tech-focused economic growth has changed the city, even though he has benefited from the tech boom himself.⁷ The past few decades had brought several IT companies to town and with them growing numbers of 'urban climbers'. While these urban climbers acquired the success symbols of development and modernisation – private automobiles and apartments in gated complexes – Bengaluru's crumbling infrastructure groaned under the weight of their aspiration. In turn, people like Swamy, who had already 'made it', sought to disentangle themselves from this consumerism and advocate a low-carbon life to halt the juggernaut of materialism that he saw as slowly cannibalising the city. Indeed, this is what distinguishes Swamy's environmentalism from bourgeois environmentalism – he blames unchecked growth and development for urban environmental degradation, not the informal livelihoods of the poor.

For Swamy, living in a house that he says is built to last only 25 years (he plans to return the land to a state of wildness at the end of his life), eschewing private cars and composting his waste is also part of prefiguring an alternative way of living in the city.⁸

Swamy's efforts are not simply focused on changing his own life – they are not individualistic. Instead, from his efforts to spread the word about his low-carbon life through the talks he gives, the blogs he writes and the work he does in his neighbourhood promoting zero waste practices, it is evident that Swamy is engaged in a collective project of remaking life in the city. People like Swamy see themselves as citizens contributing to better cities and a better planet through changed consumption and community action, an expression of democratic citizenship ([Schlosberg and Craven, 2019](#)). Indeed, many eco-practitioners in Bengaluru are engaged in green lifestyle activism. Some work at the grassroots level, using peer-to-peer education to recruit more practitioners. Others have started organisations which are involved in changing urban policy.

Through interviews, participant observation and online engagement, I find that for Bengaluru's eco-practitioners, interest in green living is sincere, ideologically driven and not preoccupied with enhancing one's own social status. Rather, it emerges from a critique of urban growth trajectories and a desire to do something about them. However, because green living is being promoted in a context where consuming power is a sign of social status and worth, and conversely being perceived as poor is stigmatised, green lifestyle proponents draw boundaries between themselves and the 'accidental environmentalist' (cf [Kennedy and Horne, 2020](#)) to make green practices more acceptable within their class group. When these already powerful actors actively use social status as a strategy to popularise green lifestyles, they *other* the poor and reproduce an existing, unequal social order, while gaining more ecological legitimacy and political power themselves.

Findings: othering the poor

Green consumption practitioners legitimise their bicycling, recycling and gardening practices by actively distancing them from the livelihood practices of the poor. They create defensive distinctions that set them apart both from the poor and penurious working-class cyclist or recycler, and the materialistic new middle classes ([Anantharaman, 2017](#)). Class performances increase the popularity of eco-practices within the new middle classes ([Anantharaman, 2018](#)), while moral boundary work cements the power of eco-lifestyle practitioners in the city by enabling them to gain greater ethical credit, and thus moral authority.

Elite and ethical identities are constructed and maintained by deploying inherited and accumulated social, cultural and economic capital. Bengaluru's eco-practitioners enjoy comfortable lifestyles, enabled by high incomes obtained by working in the 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 convenient and status affirming. For example, cycling evangelists in their advocacy work went 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, but 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, sadly it is needed, if this guy is high up so why can't I cycle. I tell people that nobody has lost respect for me. I give talks in industry meets. It hasn't affected my company's brands and its ability to sell products.'

By emphasising how he, a person who has 'made it', has adopted cycling as his main form of commute without damaging his reputation or economic prospects, Swamy makes clear that it is not bicycling that is low status, only the poor cyclist. Once the bicycle is recovered from its association as the poor man's vehicle, it becomes appropriate for elite consumption. This is also accomplished by buying high-quality bicycles and specialised gear to make bicycle rides safer and more pleasant ([Anantharaman, 2017](#)).

Studies of zero waste, urban gardening and organic food practices reveal similar dynamics. Middle-class households rely on domestic help to carry out daily cleaning and waste removal tasks, and neighbourhood 'zero-waste' systems employ waste workers to segregate and transport waste ([Anantharaman, 2014](#)). Urban gardeners buy land in surrounding villages or use their expansive homes to experiment with new ways of growing food ([Frazier, 2018](#); [van Holstein, 2019](#)). Across these examples, economic resources are invested to both make the green practice practicable, while also making it look and feel different from the necessity-oriented sustainability of the urban poor.

Green practices like bicycling and zero waste are anchored in communities whose formation is facilitated by the Internet, social media, but also offline forums like neighbourhood and apartment associations, workplaces and social events.

Communities serve as critical sites for social learning, where skills and knowledge are shared, encouragement provided and successes celebrated. Communities also serve as boundary-making spaces. First, because these communities are exclusively middle class in composition (while relying on domestic workers to carry out household sustainability practices), with English as the primary language of communication, they serve to create and maintain distinctions between middle-class practitioners and working-class groups (Erlar et al, 2022). Second, in community, people also learn how to talk the talk of an eco-lifestyle.

This environmental talk identifies an environmentally conscious person as someone who acts ethically not because they need to, but because they want to. This affirms status because being seen as doing green things out of preference as opposed to necessity confers power in the form of moral authority. Moral credit for reducing environmental impact is associated with the perceived intentionality of the practice, with high-income actors perceived as more likely than low-income actors to intentionally reduce environmental impact (Kennedy and Horne, 2020). The following text taken from the website of one of Bangalore's most popular bicycling communities reveals how this perception is maintained in Bangalore through the discourses and symbols associated with eco-practices:

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.⁹

The author of this text is a first-generation Bengalorean who moved to the city from a small town for a successful career that increased his net-worth substantially. At one point, he owned as many as six cars. His decision to become a cyclist came after he watched the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, which made him worry about climate change. However, this decision was met with surprise from many people in his life. He told me that the T-shirt was his way of combating the criticism he received when he first began to bicycle. By emphasising that bicycling for the middle classes is a voluntary act taken on not just for personal benefits like fitness, but also for planetary stewardship, the

practice is elevated to a status of ethical import, distinguishing cyclists from car-drivers whose continued patronage of automobiles is evidence of their apathy to environmental problems. However, it is important to note that not all middle-class cyclists cease driving.

In India, where ownership of a car or motorbike is a marker of respectability and even marriageability, bicycling has status costs. Hence, justifying that these decisions are made from choice and not necessity becomes more important. There were careful discursive distinctions made between those who engaged in resource-conserving behaviours out of necessity versus those who came to these acts out of an ecological consciousness. In making these distinctions, the stigmas associated with the poor remain intact, who were seen as neither elite nor ethical despite doing the same practices. Take for example this following interview excerpt with a woman in her mid-thirties who had left her IT job to look for work in the environmental sector:

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

Ragini: Yes, for a long time. And, 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 realised I had enough, earned enough.

When Ragini realised she had 'earned enough' to be financially secure, she was able to downshift her life. Other interviewees who had left their IT jobs to start eco-businesses or work in the non-profit sector were similarly able to take this financial risk as they had either accumulated savings or owned property, or because they could rely 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 one wanted to, was key to the identity-formation of the new middle-class 'ethical elite' (cf [Kennedy and Horne 2020](#)). On the other hand, waste pickers and other waste workers were dismissed as having 'vested interests' because their engagement with waste materials emerged out of livelihood necessity as opposed to some citizenly, do-good impulse. What was underplayed in this narrative was that the individuals who could take up these time-consuming green practices voluntarily had already amassed wealth and resources. This resonates with research showing that

working-class people are often excluded from and alienated by many forms of environmentalism (Bell, 2019).

Stores of accumulated cultural capital made discursive performances granting ecological legitimacy convincing. For India's new middle classes, cultural capital, accumulated over multiple generations of marrying within castes and reinforced through educational experiences in English-medium schools and colleges, is key to consolidating an identity as the beacons of progress. The capacity to talk convincingly of their practices as *environmental* practices, and articulate their importance to planetary wellbeing, health and urban ecologies was in itself connected to Western education. Waste management practitioners also used technical language and scientific concepts to symbolise their practices as suitably modern. For example, new middle-class waste management practitioners were often found discussing the relative merits of aerobic versus anaerobic composting, or the difficulties of recycling multi-layer packaging. Groups unable to perform the same type of talk were not granted the same level of ecological legitimacy (Anantharaman, 2021).

Other studies in Bengaluru identify similar dynamics. A 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, was used to create and maintain symbolic boundaries that excluded lower-middle-class people (Erler et al, 2020). This restyling of a long-standing provisioning and consumption practice indigenous to the drought-prone Deccan plateau, where Bengaluru is located, disassociates the practice from its rural and non-dominant caste origins. A study of urban gardeners in Bengaluru found that middle-class gardeners position themselves as carriers of knowledge, sophistication and 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 recognised as 'good' urban agriculturalists because of their use of pesticides and fertilisers (Frazier, 2018). What is ignored here is that these working-class communities use pesticides and fertilisers because these chemical inputs are subsidised by the state. Market gardeners are more price-sensitive and time restricted than well-to-do organic gardeners who have disposable incomes to buy expensive inputs and labour power. Ignoring how structural constraints mediate practice misreads economic factors as lack of knowledge and commitment.

Finally, social capital gave eco-practitioners access to lawyers, managers, accountants, urban planners, researchers and media professionals. Access to this expertise (or institutionalised cultural capital, in Bourdieu's words) through kinship networks, educational networks, and so on, helped bicycling and waste management practitioners gain more publicity for their activities (through the media), 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). Their activism has material impact, particularly with respect to significant changes in municipal recycling systems ([Luthra, 2021](#)). Most eco-lifestyle practitioners are not just changing their own practices. They are also using their monetary power, connections with bureaucrats and surplus time to transform the social and material infrastructures in a manner that affects all urban residents ([Gopakumar, 2020](#)).

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I argue that performative environmentalism, as performed through lifestyle practices embedded in a particular eco-habitus that is inaccessible to those who are not endowed in economic resources, dominant cultural capital or social connections, enables the new middle classes to accrue ecological legitimacy while denying it to other social groups. This *othering* of the poor and devaluation of their environmental practices reproduces enduring social inequalities along class (and caste) lines. The aesthetic and performative biases and exclusions of sustainable communities are both historically grounded and reinforced by everyday performances that grant ecological legitimacy. These legitimising performances, by being accessible only to high-cultural-capital groups, marginalise the voices of those most affected by the status quo of consumer-capitalism, thus intensifying the silencing of working-class and poor communities in urban environmental politics and discouraging cross-class collective action required for social transformation ([Kennedy and Johnston, 2019](#)).

Doing green practices provides a sense of purpose and progress to elite environmentalists concerned about local and global ecological crises, all while protecting and even reproducing a hierarchal social order. When this dynamic is ignored, as it often is in policy documents and research coming out of the global North, it can normalise the privilege that allows one to consume at high rates and then voluntarily cut down consumption in response to environmental awareness ([Anantharaman, 2018](#)). It creates feel-good spaces that deflect critical attention from

the broader economic system and downplays the need for structural change. Indeed, this is why I deliberately use the word performative because I speculate that performative environmentalism performs a task of concealment by giving an impression of environmental progress when there might not be much ([Ehgartner et al, 2017](#)). While I do not claim that all forms of green consumption are performative environmentalism, or that all individual acts of environmentalism can be reduced to feel-good distraction, I am simply saying that naming these acts as performative environmentalism focuses our attention on the political work they do in the world, as much as their ecological impacts or cultural meaning.¹⁰ Performative environmentalism might thus help us reconnect studies of (sustainable) consumption to a tradition of critique (as called for in [Evans, 2018](#)), and to questions about how (green) capitalism perpetuates both inequality and ecological harm ([Fraser, 2021](#)).¹¹

This type of analysis is all the more significant because green consumption is an important expression of mainstream environmentalism, particularly in North America, and also now in India ([Shwom and Lorenzen, 2012](#); [Kennedy and Givens, 2019](#)). Political economist Peter Dauvergne identifies eco-consumerism as a manifestation of the 'environmentalism of the rich' emerging from the traditions of moderate, Western environmentalism, and reflecting the commodifying, co-opting and individualising effects of neoliberal capitalism on radical environmental movements ([Dauvergne, 2016](#)). He and other critical scholars assert that green consumption substitutes and detracts from more systematic critiques or radical challenges to the neoliberal-capitalist economic and political order ([Maniates, 2001](#); [Guthman, 2003](#); [Johnston, 2008](#); [Johnston et al, 2009](#)).

While it might be tempting to declare that the dilution of environmentalism is purely a product of top-down efforts, I speculate that the everyday legitimating structures of performative environmentalism are also implicated in the perpetuation of Band-Aid solutions.¹² Bridging a Marxist-political economic lens that is critical of consumerism and capitalism with cultural approaches that emphasise how consumption is a site of creativity, resistance and meaning-making, I show that it is these very strategies of meaning-making around sustainable consumption that reproduce inequality and stigmatise poverty. As cultural studies of consumption remind us, ethical consumers are not passive dupes of capitalism or hedonistic pursuers of new pleasure but rather thinking, feeling actors who engage in complex processes of identity formation, belonging and care ([Evans, 2018](#)). Yet in their cultural strategies of making sustainable

consumption more possible and more practicable, they risk reproducing the very social orders that the environmental crisis emerges from.

Performative environmentalism can help normalise green practices among high-status groups, and thus in some ways contribute to increased ecological sustainability. But at the same time, it stigmatises the poor, reproducing status-based social inequality.¹³ By marginalising the very constituencies who are most likely to have a critique of state and corporate capital, and of neoliberal urban development policies (because they are most harmed by these policies), performative environmentalism could occlude other forms of radical environmental activism, cross-class collective action, commodify protest and make sustainability a business opportunity as opposed to a route to broader social transformation.¹⁴ A critical lens on performative environmentalism, as opposed to obfuscating state and corporate responsibility and further scapegoating consumers, can help avoid false or partial solutions. It can refocus the energy of environmentalists in building cross-class coalitions and movements that confront states and corporations, and result in structural, equitable solutions as opposed to individualistic ones. To move forward, an honest reappraisal of what/who becomes recognised and validated as sustainable is necessary; as is a commitment to see the material deprivation of the majority of the world and overconsumption of the polluter elite as ontologically linked and ethically unacceptable.

Notes

¹ There is also a parallel stream of research studying the political economy of consumption that uses the consumption angle to problematise the broader structures of the capitalist economy (Princen et al, 2002; Dauvergne, 2010). However, the research on 'sustainable consumption' has largely evolved without engaging this political economic perspective and underplayed issues of power, barring some notable exceptions (Fuchs et al, 2016; Isenhour et al, 2019).

² David Evans argues that discursive slippage of what exactly constitutes consumption has made the concept less useful. Sustainability is a similarly slippery concept, with diverse understandings of what exactly counts as sustainable (Greenberg, 2013). Sustainable consumption is thus doubly muddled. One point of distinction in the applied social science literature is between strong versus weak sustainable consumption, where the weak variety focuses on efficiency gains, green product purchase and market-based activities while strong sustainable consumption

emphasises absolute reductions in resource consumption alongside decentering growth and commercial activities. A systematic review of research on communicating sustainable consumption found that most journal articles promoting sustainable consumption focus on incremental changes in individual consumer behaviour, that is, 'weak' sustainable consumption ([Fischer et al, 2021](#)).

3 The name of the city was changed from Bangalore to Bengaluru in 2014, when fieldwork was ongoing for the project. I use both names because while Bengaluru is the current official name, Bangalore is more common in the literature.

4 Countering individualised neoliberal explanations for poverty that blame the poor, these scholars see poverty as constituted by sociocultural and political-economic structures and examine how 'the poor' are engaged by diverse social actors and for what purposes. Sustainability is emerging as a key terrain for relational poverty studies.

5 Bourdieu names these three species of capital in *Distinction* to explain that how much access a person has to each of these capital types determines one's social status in a setting. Economic capital is defined in monetary terms, simply the resources that individuals can amass and deploy in their everyday practices, while social capital for Bourdieu is the 'aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively owned capital' ([Bourdieu, 2002](#): 88). Finally, he distinguishes three types of cultural capital – the embodied state (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), the objectified state (cultural goods) and institutionalised state (obtained through educational qualifications).

6 In Goffman's terms, environmental concern functions as a frame here, setting the terms of the dominant social norms and expectations of a particular setting.

7 Govind Gopakumar documents a similar pattern in his study of automobility in Bengaluru. He talks about a middle-class discourse that diagnoses the rising number of automobiles as a major problem in the city. There is a contradiction here – those who complain the most are often also always using automobiles ([Gopakumar, 2020](#)).

8 For work on sustainable consumption as prefigurative politics see [Yates \(2015\)](#) and [Schlosberg and Craven \(2019\)](#).

9 The rest of the text says: 'IT'S A TOOL THAT MAKES OTHERS 2 FEEL GUILTY & WILL OPEN UP THEIR MINDS 4 SUPPORTING OR CONVERTING FROM MOTOR VEHICLE TO BICYCLE. ... One can ensure to pass on a clear message of "Going Green for a better tomorrow"'. The text is copied verbatim from the webpage that can be accessed here: <http://www.gogreengocycling.org/why-gogreen-tee> (last accessed 24 September 2019). A picture of the Go Green T-shirt is also available on the page.

10 Indeed, I would argue that performative environmentalism is a more politically productive term to use than 'weak sustainable consumption' or 'green consumerism'. It ensures that as scholars, we do not implicitly convey an assumption that we think something is sustainable/green (aka good) even when it reproduces inequality, and thereby inadvertently reproducing the very biases we critique.

11 That is, it could help connect cultural and practice-based studies of sustainable consumption to the Marxist political-economic school of thought that sees the current ecological crisis as connected to and inseparable from the workings of capital as a force cheapening life, nature and care ([Patel and Moore, 2018](#)).

12 This is similar to the ways in which Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen identify the 'imperial mode of living' as how the logic of liberal markets are unconsciously reproduced in everyday practices, which in turn legitimate capitalist accumulation and growth-oriented state policies as necessary and inevitable ([Brand and Wissen, 2021](#)).

13 Social inequality also results in poor environmental quality, disproportionately experienced by the marginalised ([Cushing et al, 2015](#); [Holifield, 2015](#)).

14 This dynamic is especially visible in US cities, where municipal governments promote community gardens, farmers' markets and bicycle lanes because they represent a form of 'sustainability capital' that make a neighbourhood more attractive to wealthy, White residents, and therefore to real-estate developers. This is what Miriam Greenberg 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 ([Greenberg, 2013](#)). Sometimes this has perverse sustainability

effects. When cities develop bike and public transit infrastructure, wealthy gentrifiers moving into these neighbourhoods actually emit more carbon than those they displace, simply because of their wealth and higher consuming capacity (Rice et al, 2020). However, irrespective of these higher carbon footprints, it is cycling techies and organic moms who are seen as agents of sustainability, not immigrants living five to a room, driving gas-guzzlers to work from their suburban homes, because they have little choice.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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