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City Limits

Looking for Environment and Justice in the Urban Context

Amita Baviskar

Abstract

As cities have overtaken the countryside as habitat for most of humanity, their environmental politics have become all the more critical. However, the contours of urban environmental politics—their discursive frame and ultimate aims, their authorized cast of actors, and modes of action—often have little to do with ecology *or* justice. Why is this so? This chapter argues that the power to define and address an issue as an “environmental problem” is unequally distributed. Social location and cultural capital shape interpretive frameworks and capacities to act. Selective and superficial framings of environmental issues derive from urban inequality. Indeed, the urban environment poses a peculiar perceptual problem because it does not seem to be composed of commonly understood features of “nature.” That is, the predominantly artificial aspect of the urban environment complicates understandings of ecological issues based on the template of rural environments. Historically, urban environments have been managed in terms of securing spatial and social order. This logic continues to dictate environmental politics in the city, to the detriment of ecology and justice.

The City: Two Views

Anuj Gupta, 45, senior manager with a corporate firm in Gurgaon, a suburb of Delhi, stood at the window of his luxury apartment in Malibu Towne, looking down at the scene below, he recounted:

This used to be all green. Trees and fields of wheat and yellow mustard in winter.
That’s why we moved here. Because of the fresh air and peace. But now it’s a mess.

Pointing to the glass and steel skyscrapers that punctuate the distance, he continued:

It's all built up. I drive out of the gate of the colony and I'm stuck in traffic for hours. There's no order, no discipline. The air is so bad that my son has severe asthma. We have air purifiers installed at home and his school bus is air-conditioned but he has to carry his inhaler with him all the time. Half the kids in his class do the same.

Turning back, as a maid served us glasses of lemonade, he gestured at the cool, marble-floored room:

This apartment, too. You'd think this was worth it but we have no water. We pay a fortune for private tankers to fill our reservoir and we buy filtered water for drinking and cooking from another supplier. We're supposed to have 24-hour electricity but the power supply is so bad that our generators work overtime. The maintenance charges are through the roof. The only thing I can say is that at least it's safe. Out of the colony gates, it's another story, but inside we're all right. The security guards have strict instructions to check everyone who comes in; we have CCTVs (closed-circuit television) and intercom. All the maids and drivers have ID cards issued by our RWA (Residents' Welfare Association) and verified by the police. It's OK here, safetywise. We don't go out much, only to work, school or the shopping malls. The malls here are good, at least there's that: nice stores, lots of places to eat. But the rest of it is rubbish. All these people. So much congestion. The government does nothing at all. In fact, it only encourages them. We pay taxes but who listens to us? Our RWA has had to file a court case to get that slum next door removed. It's filthy; their children shit out on the street; you can't even walk in the colony park because of the stink from across the wall. Who knows what disease we might get? Last year, we paid extra to raise the boundary wall; you hear of theft and murder in the news all the time. Gurgaon is a mess, I tell you.

Across the wall from Anuj Gupta's apartment, Sarita Devi, 32, sits outside her *jhuggi* (shack) chopping onions and potatoes, every now and then swatting at the mosquitoes that swarm up from the open drain that runs alongside. Even at dusk, the tin-walled shed in which she lives with her husband and three children is stifling; they have a watercooler but when the power cuts out—which it does frequently—there's no respite from the heat. The cooler and a television set are Sarita's prized possessions, purchased from her earnings as a domestic worker cleaning homes and washing dishes in the Malibu Towne apartments across the razor wire-topped wall. She earns a steady wage, all the more essential because her husband Manoj does not have a steady job, as she describes:

He used to work in a factory but they fired him when he missed a few days because he had to go back to the village to help his brother. Then he thought he'd start his own business and sell vegetables, but that didn't work out either. He then became a helper to a mason on a construction site and got good money but, for the last two years, there's been no demand. Now he drives a cycle rickshaw but that doesn't bring in much. If I didn't work, how would we feed ourselves? Everything keeps getting more and more expensive.

Tilting her head toward the tiny room behind her, a tidy space in which pots and pans gleam on a shelf beside wall calendars showing Hindu deities and a bed—the sole item of furniture—is pushed up against the wall, Sarita continues:

And this *jhuggi*: we bought it and built it up with our own hands but they keep saying that our *basti* (settlement) is illegal and we'll be evicted. We've been here for twenty years, how can they remove us? The Councilor says he'll look after us, but you can't trust anyone these days; they're only looking after their own interest. If we had to leave this place, where would we go? Where would I work? As it is, life is hard. I queue up at 5:30 every morning to fill up pots of water; every day there's a fight at the tap. The toilets are so filthy it turns my stomach. In the monsoon last year, the drains overflowed and sewage entered my *jhuggi*. My youngest daughter had diarrhea for two months. We spent three thousand rupees on getting her treated. But I say, all right, at least we're not starving. At least we have a roof over our heads. This is the fate of poor people. What can we do? But if they take away even this, what's left for us? I can't sleep at night I'm so worried.

Though only a wall separates them, Anuj Gupta and Sarita Devi seem to inhabit different worlds. The contrast is most vivid in the physical spaces in which they live. Gupta's home is at least twenty times larger than Sarita's shack. It has running hot and cold water, three bathrooms, and six air conditioners. The apartment block sits amidst lush lawns and frangipani trees, a swimming pool, and children's play area. Sarita's home is squashed between other shacks, each a tangle of tin sheets and rough masonry, along a potholed lane bisected by a drain where young children squat to relieve themselves and pigs snuffle around in the wet muck. Dogs root through heaps of waste, dirty plastic bags, and decaying organic matter. There's nowhere to play so kids crowd the street, dodging between passing rickshaws and motorbikes. At each end of the lane there is a public tap that supplies water for two hours in the morning and evening; it's usually at low pressure and the number of waiting people high. There is one mobile toilet with ten cubicles for the entire lane of more than two hundred households: by common consent only women use it; men defecate in a scrubby wasteland nearby.

Despite these obvious differences, Gupta and Sarita's observations about the places in which they live also contain some telling parallels. Take water and electricity, for instance. Both complain about shortages and unreliability. However, Gupta is able to buy his way out of the problem, whereas Sarita must make do with the little that comes her way. Both are concerned about their children's well-being and the burden of disease to which they are exposed. However, while Gupta junior has access to the best health care, Sarita's child almost died because of a preventable gastrointestinal infection caused by drinking contaminated water. Both worry about safety. Gupta frets about burglaries and violent crime, anarchy on the streets, and ensures that his college-going daughter is chauffeured everywhere. Sarita spends the second half of her working day wondering if her eight-year-old daughter came home from school

all right and whether her neighbor is keeping an eye on her as she promised. Along with this, however, is an ever-looming anxiety that Gupta will never have to face: Sarita's fear about losing her home. More than the precariousness of her husband's earnings, it is the threat of eviction that constitutes the core of Sarita's worries: that this modest yet precious home will be razed by bulldozers, its contents scattered, her family's life shattered.

Gupta's and Sarita's lives crisscross in other ways. For one, Sarita cleans his apartment, wiping down its marble floors with rose-scented detergent, dusting the knickknacks on its shelves, washing dishes. For another, when Gupta's chauffeur impatiently honks at a rickshaw to move out of his way on the street outside, he could be honking at Sarita's husband, Manoj. And of course, the *jhuggi basti* that so disgusts Gupta, and that his RWA has mobilized to evict, happens to be Sarita's home.

What Is the Environment?

How do we interpret these sometimes conflicting, sometimes converging narratives in terms of environmentalism? For most people in cities in the Global South, the popular understanding of "environment"—one that cuts across social classes—centers on its meaning as *habitat*. That is, the surrounding landscape within which one lives—its physical characteristics, social relations, as well as the ideas and sentiments associated with it—represents the sum total of one's environment. The concerns that emerge from this environment may vary: for Gupta, spatial order and physical safety matter most, whereas Sarita's priorities are security of shelter, job opportunities for her husband, and her children's health. The "structure of feelings" that the environment evokes for them may be different: pride, disgust, fear, comfort, hope. Yet both share the notion of "environment" as related to amenities and infrastructure—water, electricity, housing, sanitation, roads—that constitute the essentials of a decent life in the city. Several of these are understood to be public goods and a shortfall in their provisioning is felt keenly as a breach of the contract between state and citizens. The language of claiming these "environmental" amenities therefore uses the vocabulary of civic rights.

This all-encompassing notion of "environment" as *habitat*—a tangible place imbued with intangible yet powerful relationships governed by the state—is narrowed down within the field of *urban studies*. Here, the "environment" is defined in terms of the characteristics of physical space, especially land use—density of built-up areas, quality of housing, extent of green cover, but also infrastructure in the form of transport and sanitation. Within this literature, then, one comes across an explicit discussion of "environmental problems": air pollution from factories and motor vehicles, water pollution from untreated sewage and industrial effluents, the shrinking of green areas and the congestion of the built environment. Historically, urban studies took a wide-angle

view aimed at understanding (and engineering) an ideal relationship between environment and society, including within its sweep the moral as well as material well-being of city dwellers as shaped by their physical setting. The work of scholars and planners such as Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford, and Jane Jacobs exemplifies this perspective (Tyrwhitt 1947; Jacobs 1961; Mumford 1961). However, “environmental issues” in contemporary urban studies are usually studied in isolation and the socioeconomic processes in which they are embedded are treated as given. And when changes in urban land use and political economy are the focus of analysis, ecological aspects are mentioned only in passing, if at all (e.g., Desai 2012).

Public perception largely regards polluted air and water as externalities, unfortunate by-products of the wealth-generating processes that make cities engines of economic growth to which municipal authorities turn a blind eye because of the powerful players involved or because they are pressed with providing more “basic needs” such as water, roads, and waste disposal. This is the case with almost all towns in India where industrial manufacturing is a major part of the economy (Varghese et al. 1998). Only when urban elites distance themselves from dirty production processes—for instance, when the economic base of a city shifts from industrial manufacturing to services—do they mobilize against particular environmental ills, especially those that affect their “quality of life.”¹ Besides air and water pollution, green areas and, increasingly, wetlands are also the focus of analysis and action but, notably, ecological arguments are mobilized in a manner that brackets them off from a wider consideration of environmental flows (Baviskar 2017). Gupta, for example, is active in a campaign to protect a patch of wilderness on the edge of Gurgaon that is threatened by real estate developers. The campaign highlights the ecological importance of the area as a refuge for biodiversity and as catchment for groundwater. However, the campaigners do not recognize or address the fact that they themselves are largely responsible for what they define as Gurgaon’s environmental problems: they were the first to buy and occupy the luxury apartments that were built on farmers’ fields and village commons; their water-intensive lifestyle plunged aquifers into the dark zone; buildings and roads that cater to them created heat islands that cry out for relief. Protecting the last remnant of Gurgaon’s greenery then is a token, a talisman to denote the desire for a landscape that includes urban forests as well as shopping malls, never mind the contradictions.

Thus, it is a select social group that explicitly invokes ecological arguments and mobilizes them to pursue interests that they deem to be “environmental.” In practice, environmentalism as an ideology centered on ecological protection

¹ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, public interest litigation against pollution led the Delhi High Court to order the closure of older manufacturing industries in the metropolis. This was not, however, an instance of environmental concerns overriding economic ones. The extensive lands vacated by mills were profitably repurposed as higher-value real estate for building of-fices, shopping and entertainment malls, and luxury residences (Baviskar et al. 2006).

for the benefit of present and future human generations, nonhuman species, and planetary biophysical processes is a resource available primarily to those who have the cultural capital to leverage it. This cultural capital is not immobile or impregnable: in some cases, it has been eroded by sections of the rural underclass through their struggles to secure rights to land, forests, water, fisheries, and other resources. Their claims have succeeded when they have highlighted how ecologically sustainable their practices are and how their cause aligns with social justice. Such social movements, classified in the literature as the “environmentalism of the poor,” have curbed the power of dominant institutions that frame and prosecute environmental agendas by deploying the language of scientific rationality and economic efficiency to dispossess vulnerable populations (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). Yet, in the urban context, it has been far harder to challenge the cultural capital of these institutions and the elite social groups associated with them. While the dominant framing of urban “environmental issues” pertaining to noxious externalities has sometimes been successfully used by poor people to oppose specific projects—the location of a solid waste incinerator near African American and Hispanic neighborhoods in South-Central Los Angeles, for example—it has rarely been questioned or replaced by another that represents poor people’s priorities (Bullard 1990; Di Chiro 1995). Those who share Sarita’s social location are scarcely able to articulate their rights to water and sanitation—or, for that matter, secure shelter and jobs—in the vocabulary of environmentalism.² Furthermore, they are rarely able to use an ecological frame to mount a critique of the resource-intensive lifestyles of the residents of Malibu Towne.

Why is this? There are two aspects to this puzzle. First, ecology is often hard to see in the city. The concentration of concrete and tarmac, brick and glass, seems to squeeze it out of existence. The built environment overwhelmingly appears to be an artifact of human manufacture, of materials transformed by technology. For minds socialized to separate “nature” from “culture”—a long-standing intellectual distinction made across the world—it seems evident that there is not a lot of ecology in the city, except in the attenuated form of gardens, birds, and insects (Williams 1980).³ Unlike rural landscapes where nature is palpably visible in the form of soil and water, plants and animals, and is valued as a productive resource, the urban environment fails to yield such recognizable indices to which productive value may be ascribed. In rural areas, social movements have been able to fuse the vocabulary of citizenship and environmentalism to fight for productive resources

² The only exception to this rule is the recent attempt by waste-pickers who collect and recycle paper, plastic, and other scrap, to demand a place in the city because of the environmental services they provide. I shall discuss their case later in this essay.

³ Thus, a recent book on Bengaluru, *Nature in the City* (Nagendra 2016) focuses entirely on trees, public parks, and private gardens without considering the larger set of biophysical processes and material transformations that urban “nature” encompasses. In this book, as in commonsense understandings, “nature” is uncritically equated with green spaces.

and livelihoods as embodied in and deriving from nature. In urban areas, productive resources—factories, firms, and financial capital—seem unrelated to nature. Visible only in isolated units (and not as the underlying foundation of economic and social well-being) and valued primarily in terms of consumption, urban ecology becomes a concern mainly for elites who can afford to pursue such “minor,” “nonessential” causes.

The second reason why the urban poor have not been able to wield environmentalism as a discursive resource to secure their interests has to do with legitimacy. Environmental debates are almost always framed in terms of *public interest*. That is, an environmental good is held to be universally beneficial, transcending the interests of particular sections of society. Poor people’s quest to secure the environmental resources that matter most to them—shelter and sanitation, for instance—are viewed by the state and its reference publics as particularistic interests, of concern primarily to the affected group. This is especially so when these interests come up against those of more powerful groups who claim to represent the wider social good. In the last fifteen years in Delhi, public interest litigation by environmentalists and RWAs like that of Gupta’s colony has brought about the eviction of settlements, such as the one that Sarita inhabits, on the grounds that they were an “environmental nuisance” or were polluting the river Yamuna. The courts came down on the side of “clean and green Delhi,” dismissing pleas that their orders would deprive vulnerable groups of basic shelter and subsistence. Instead, they castigated slum dwellers for occupying land illegally, a crime born out of compulsion in a city that provides little affordable, legal housing for its underclass near places of work. At the same time, portraying the poor who lived along the riverbanks as environmental villains in the Yamuna case was a spectacular miscarriage of justice since the untreated waste released into the river came from better-off neighborhoods that were connected to the sewage system. Evicting squatter settlements along the embankments didn’t solve the pollution problem; it only allowed land in Central Delhi to be made available for redevelopment (Baviskar 2011b). A similar pattern of public interest environmental activism adversely and unfairly affecting the poor prevailed in the case of Delhi’s drive to deal with air pollution caused by vehicular traffic (Véron 2006). On the other hand, the same courts have condoned environmental violations by powerful corporate organizations and by the government, on the grounds that these projects involved a lot of money or were “prestigious.” Thus, a clutch of shopping malls and luxury hotels on a tract of forest in South Delhi, and a grand temple complex and luxury apartments on the Yamuna floodplain in East Delhi, were retrospectively legalized. Ghertner (2015) argues that, along with the financial capital at stake, what moved the judges was the notion of environment-as-aesthetics: glittering shopping malls and opulent luxury hotels *look* good, they enhance the appearance of a “world-class city,” so they are to be preferred over forests and floodplains. Court decisions reflect the hierarchy in how public/private interests around the environment come to be organized

in the public mind: first come “economic growth” and “national prestige” as represented by corporate capital (state and private), while clean air and water or green areas languish far below. And at the bottom, stigmatized by their lack of cultural capital, flounder the urban poor.

The notion that “what is good for General Motors is good for America” continues to dominate perceptions of public interest across the world. Economic growth is the hegemonic ideology of national development; ecological issues are relegated to second-order concerns. The state promotes capital-intensive projects that generate short-term revenues, licit and illicit, for state actors as well as “infrastructure” for further economic growth: this is believed to be synonymous with the “public good.” When the state does take note of environmental damage by powerful actors—as was the case in March 2016 when the politically well-connected Art of Living Foundation organized a giant event on the floodplain of the river Yamuna in Delhi—it first makes minatory noises and then soft pedals on punitive action.⁴ These modes of thinking also regard the urban poor as illegitimate or, at best, irrelevant actors in environmental matters. By the rules of this game, capitalism usually trumps ecology, and equity is a particularly low-value card. So, in an unequal city, elite notions of environmental good prevail as the public interest, and elite projects override ecological concerns. The pursuit of apparently universally desired goals by the state and public-minded citizens grievously hurts the most vulnerable residents. How could the rural poor occasionally overcome a similar hegemonic stranglehold? As noted above, it requires considerable cultural capital to be able to insert oneself into an elite conversation bristling with class bias. Even when activist organizations working with the poor muster legal arguments and the facts to support them, they find themselves handicapped. However, in all cases where the rural poor have been successful in asserting their rights to resources, they have done so by mobilizing a counter-narrative about the superiority of their conservationist ethics and practices, often performing the role of the “virtuous peasant” or “ecologically noble savage” (Baviskar 1995).⁵ Organizations of the urban poor find it very difficult to marshal similar moral claims that marry ecology with justice. For there they are: slum dwellers, living in squalor and condemned for it. When their claims to their habitat are unsupported by law or long usage (compared to their rural counterparts) and they cannot demonstrate a conservationist ethic, how do they assert their ecological virtue? Among their numbers, only waste pickers and recyclers are now trying to repackage their

⁴ Analyses of environmental administration and litigation show a clear and consistent record of corporate firms being let off the hook for environmental crimes. Compounding the state–industry nexus is the fact that those crimes could not have been committed without the complicity of the state. This willingness to turn a blind eye to corporate crimes and, when forced to take cognizance, to condone rather than condemn, pervades the political economy of environmental law (Narain et al. 2014; Sethi 2016).

⁵ This is also the case with the 2006 Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, achieved after sustained political mobilization.

public image as upholders of urban ecology and it remains to be seen whether they will be able to use environmentalism as a lever to prise open the door to the status and security so long denied to them (CERAG 2009). For the rest of the urban poor, the notion that the public interest might include their rights to space, shelter, jobs, and civic amenities remains not only out of reach but out of the realm of possibility.

Order in the City

The responsibility for creating and managing cities so that all citizens have access to a healthy environment rests mainly with governments. Political survival requires that the state secure legitimacy for its rule by supervising stable conditions for capital accumulation. Historically, the state's push to regulate urban environments has been prompted by the desire to shape model citizens who would be willing subjects in this project of rule (Joyce 2003). The threat of a restive urban underclass seizing power has been around for centuries, but was realized most dramatically during the French Revolution in 1789, leading to a drastic rethinking of how city spaces were used and organized. Baron Haussmann's demolition of dense neighborhoods and the insertion of wide boulevards throughout Paris in 1853–1869 was aimed at making the city “more governable, prosperous, healthy, and architecturally imposing” but, above all, “safe against popular insurrections” (Scott 1998:59, 61). The logic of urban planning was to simultaneously create spatial and social order. In colonial India, this imperative was at work in the redesign of Delhi (Gupta 1981) and Lucknow (Oldenburg 1984) after widespread revolt against British rule in 1857. When the British built their imperial capital of New Delhi, spatial segregation between white and native populations, as well as a strict code assigning housing on the basis of rank and status, was the norm (Legg 2007). The strategy of regulating physical spaces for social control, whether in the form of explicit policies of apartheid or the unspoken yet all-pervasive rules of class and ethnicity that govern gated communities and the like, continues to prevail into contemporary times (Caldeira 1992; Fischer et al. 2014).

Along with the imperative of social control, there were other, more liberal ideas of social welfare at work in the imposition of spatial order. The notion that urban spaces should be designed for the physical, social, and moral improvement of all citizens, especially the most deprived, lay behind the first experiments in town planning initiated by Victorian philanthropists in Britain (Macqueen 2011). Social engineering via spatial fixes was attempted on a larger scale when Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model was adopted in Britain and the United States, and was subsequently imported to the colonies, influencing the layout of Lahore, New Delhi, Quezon City, Canberra, and parts of Sao Paulo (Howard 1902/1946; Glover 2013). Concerns about public health were central to these plans: since the early nineteenth century, the threat of

contagious disease epidemics had led to increasing attention to the quality of urban water, air, and waste disposal, as well as to monitoring hygiene in places of public dining and homes. Soliciting the cooperation of citizens was crucial for this enterprise. It was continuously reiterated that cities could be clean and healthy only if their citizens were; civic compliance was sought through laws penalizing the “nuisance” of littering, urinating, and spitting in public. Thus the two organizing principles of environmental regulation were hazard and nuisance.

From its inception, then, urban environmental management has been governed by anxieties around health, hazard, and social order (see Kaviraj 1997; Chakrabarty 2002). It has privileged an aesthetic that values capital-intensive buildings and manicured green areas (Baviskar 2018). These concerns and sensibilities have precedence over issues of life and livelihood that are central to “the environmentalism of the poor.” Since angry and resentful poorer sections may constitute a threat to political order, an array of disciplining techniques in the work economy, social welfare system, and public spaces are deployed to keep them on the defensive and defuse collective mobilization (Chatterjee 2004). Thus, a 1988 cholera and gastroenteritis epidemic that killed more than 150 people in East Delhi slums led to improved municipal supply of water and, eventually, sewerage (Hazarika 1988), but larger questions about citywide distributive justice in access to water and sanitation went unaddressed, as did the issue of vulnerability to disease aggravated by the poverty of people who had been evicted from their homes in Central Delhi and forcibly settled on flood-prone land on the edge of the city. This continues to be the case even today; a brief phase of populist welfare policies in the early 1990s gave way to two decades of economic liberalization policies that have worsened inequalities in Indian cities and created a harsher, more intolerant climate for poor people’s livelihood security.⁶ For the government, resource politics in the city is about regulating spaces and managing social order such that economic growth and accumulation can continue without disruption from below. In this context, it is bourgeois environmentalists with their quality of life concerns that decide what constitutes an environmental issue (see also Mawdsley 2004).

Conclusion

As I have argued above, environmentalist action in Delhi—and in several other cities in the Global South—is guided neither by the principle of ecological sustainability nor social justice. The dominant form of action has been driven by the ideology of bourgeois environmentalism which has had perverse effects on

⁶ Saajha Manch, “Manual for People’s Planning: A View from Below of Problems of Urban Existence in Delhi” (unpublished manuscript, 2001). It remains to be seen whether the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi, elected in 2015 with overwhelming support from poorer sections of society, will succeed in improving living and working conditions for its supporters.

air and water quality, and has penalized the poor while ignoring the culpability of other classes and their “luxury emissions” and discharges (Baviskar 2011a, b). In some instances, ecological values *have* been pursued, as in campaigns to protect wetlands and areas of wilderness, but in a manner hostile to the poor communities who rely on these areas for shelter and subsistence. Only in exceptional cases do we find urban environmental action aimed at securing ecological sustainability as well as social justice. Remarkably, this is achieved by one of the most deprived and discriminated against social groups in urban India; namely, those who collect and sort solid waste for recycling (Gill 2010; Gidwani 2013).

Those who gather and process urban waste bring into the environmental frame a notion that has been missing so far: *urban metabolism* or ecology as the sum of stocks and flows of materials and energy, which includes those embodied in the built environment as well (Demaria and Schindler 2015). If urban environmentalism were to be based on such a metabolic matrix, the fact of the city as “nature’s metropolis” would overcome assumptions about the nature/culture divide (Cronon 1991). By showing the presence of “natural resources” in productive practices in the city, and by revealing the glaring inequalities in the ownership and distribution of wealth derived from nature, such an analysis would allow ecology to be made accountable to equity. (I refer here to the notion of urban metabolism as a *metaphor* for understanding environmental politics, and not as an actual model for computing quantified/monetized flows.) If Sarita and her fellow *basti*-dwellers could show how light their ecological footprint is compared to Gupta’s resource-guzzling lifestyle, and how the latter’s privileges have been facilitated by preferential treatment from the state, they too could claim environmentalism as an ideological resource, just as it has been used by some of their rural counterparts to challenge forestry, mining, and dam projects. At the same time, the systematic misrecognition of public interest would stand revealed for what it is: the pursuit of interests and ideas that serve powerful private players.

To be truly disruptive, however, such an ecological framing would have to be supplemented by a wider definition of “environmental resources.” For instance, *space* is an environmental good that may also generate livelihoods—the space of the street enables not only walking and sociality but also vending goods and selling services (de Certeau 1984; Baviskar 2011a). The social value of streets cannot be approximated by a computation of ground rent, but neither can it be subsumed within a mapping of material and energy flows. Such a calculus would have to be incorporated within a cultural matrix of what counts, where the concerns of the poorest citizens—those who lack access to private spaces and resources and rely all the more on urban commons—would have priority. This is the challenge posed by dominant notions of the city: what exactly qualifies a resource/problem to be classified as “environmental”? If it is its ecological component, where does ecology begin and end and what does it encompass? If it is about “natural resources” like land and water, how do we

discern them in the highly mediated forms in which they appear? Is a municipality's crackdown on street vendors an environmental issue? Is a *basti's* bid to get piped drinking water an environmental campaign? These questions about definition are important because they allow and disallow not only *what* can be talked about but *who* can do the talking.

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