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### Elite and Ethical: The Defensive Distinctions of Middle-Class Bicycling in Bangalore, India

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**Title**

Elite and ethical: The defensive distinctions of middle class bicycling in Bangalore, India

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**Abstract**

This article applies social practice theory to study the emergence of sustainable consumption practices like bicycling among the new middle classes of Bangalore, India. I argue that expansions of bicycling practices are dependent on the construction of *defensive distinctions*, which I define as distinctions that draw equally on lifestyle-based and ethics-based discourses to normalize bicycling among Bangalore's middle classes. With their environmental discourses and signage, middle class cyclists make claims to being ethical actors and ecological citizens concerned about global environments. Their high-end bicycles and special gear enable them to maintain their social status in personal and professional circles, despite adopting what is an essentialized and stigmatized mobility practice in a social context where personal automobiles are a dominant symbol of respectability and propertied citizenship. These defensive distinctions are anchored in communities that facilitate social

learning, skill-building, and the creation of collective identities. I highlight the importance of considering the role of ethical discourses in consolidating “low-status” social practices among “high-status” class fractions, and discuss the implications of promoting sustainable consumption through the *othering* of the poor. By applying a social practice analytic to study middle class bicycling practices, this paper makes a significant contribution to the growing literature that investigates the applicability of practice-based approaches to environmental behaviors and sustainable consumption in a novel context.

### **Keywords**

Social practice theory, middle class, sustainable consumption, bicycling, India

### **Introduction**

On a Saturday morning in 2012, the neighborhood of Jayanagar woke up to witness the inauguration of Bangalore’s first network of bicycle lanes. The Ride-a-Cycle Foundation (RACF), a small non-profit that works to promote cycle-friendly infrastructure had persistently lobbied municipal authorities to build these lanes, arguing this was an important step in making Bangalore more bicycle-friendly. White lines and bicycle symbols were painted on a network of streets in Jayanagar, delineating three feet of space

for bicycles.<sup>1</sup> That morning government representatives, RACF volunteers, and schoolchildren, along with a number of Bangalore's cyclists gathered to inaugurate these bicycling lanes. Around the celebrations, Bangalore moved as it had the day before. An older man rode past the event on a rickety bicycle. He looked very different from the other cyclists attending this event. Dressed in a *dhoti*<sup>2</sup> and riding a rusty, Indian-made bicycle, he stopped briefly, looked at the gathering and rode on. Perhaps he dismissed it as a political gathering or an event for schoolchildren. Either way, the man bicycled away. With the crowd spilling onto the road, passing cars and motorbikes weaved their ways past the gathering. Some honked loudly, while others looked on briefly. But like the man in the *dhoti*, most drove on, barely glancing at the festivity. As the speeches finished, the assembled cyclists took a ceremonial ride around the block. Leading the pack were members of the Go-Green Cycling Group. Dressed in their signature "Go-Green" T-shirts, atop high-end bicycles, wearing helmets, and in some cases, bicycle shorts, gloves, and other gear, these riders represented a new brand of cyclist. Not poor—cycling out of choice—these cyclists belonged to the new middle classes of India.<sup>3</sup> Many owned cars,

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<sup>1</sup> The cycle lanes are delineated by white lines, but are contiguous with the rest of the road.

<sup>2</sup> A *dhoti* is a traditional garment worn by men in India and other parts of South Asia. It consists of a single piece of fabric tied around the waist.

<sup>3</sup> By using the term 'new middle classes', I follow Fernandes and Heller (2006) and others who use "new" to

worked jobs in the hi-tech sector, and earned incomes that would place them firmly in the middle and upper income brackets of Indian society. Their message was clear: they were going green by going cycling.

In this paper I apply social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005) as an analytical tool to show how the new middle classes of India are legitimizing and adopting practices like bicycling that are typically associated with the poor and working classes in modernizing India. I argue that expansions of a shared community of cyclists are based on *defensive distinctions* that draw on both ethics and lifestyle-based discourses. With their environmental discourses and signage, middle class cyclists make claims to being ethical actors and ecological citizens concerned about global environments. Their high-end bicycles and specialized gear enable them to maintain their social status in personal and professional circles. I highlight the importance of considering the role of ethical discourses in consolidating “low-status” social practices among “high-status” class fractions, and discuss the implications of promoting sustainable consumption through the

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distinguish the middle classes that emerged post liberalization of the Indian economy, from the older colonial and public-sector supported middle classes. As “vanguards of social modernization” (Mawdsley, 2004), the ascendance of the new middle classes is closely linked to the economic opportunities provided by neoliberal reforms introduced in the 1980s (Fernandes, 2009). In the remainder of the paper, I use new middle class and middle class interchangeably, but always to refer to the post-liberalization middle classes of urban India.

*othering* of the poor.

India's new middle classes, along with their counterparts in countries like Brazil, China, and South Africa, herald the spread of consumer lifestyles to the developing world (Lange and Meier, 2009) and this rising consumption is bemoaned as a blow to the environment (Myers and Kent, 2004). This concern over the environmental impacts of intensifying consumerism in India necessitates an examination of the environmental politics of India's middle classes, especially in relation to their consumption patterns and practices. While contemporary scholarship on this topic suggests that there is limited scope for India's middle classes to reduce or redirect their consumption (Baviskar, 2003, 2011; Ghertner, 2012; Mawdsley, 2009), the literature largely lacks studies that examine the everyday practices and behaviors of the middle classes. By studying bicycling, an everyday commute and recreational practice that can have positive environmental benefits, my work bridges a gap in contemporary scholarship and contributes to a growing literature on middle class (sustainable) consumption and citizenship in India.

The bicycling practices I describe in this paper are particularly interesting to sociologists as they allow one to interrogate the class dimensions of sustainable consumption. In

modernizing urban India, bicycling is an activity relegated to those who have few other transportation options. As one of my interviewees remarked: “*No respectable middle-class adult would be caught on a bicycle.*”<sup>4</sup> Studying bicycling in Bangalore tells us something not just about how sustainable practices like bicycling are instituted and performed among the middle classes, but also about the strategies that middle class actors use to legitimize and adopt practices predominantly associated with the poor.<sup>5</sup> In other words, if certain lifestyles practices are key to middle class distinction, identity, and power (Fernandes and Heller 2006, following Bourdieu 1984), then how does the adoption of practices traditionally associated with deprivation and thrift occur?<sup>6</sup> Why are these practices promoted as acts of ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption? Asking these questions helps explicitly identify the relationship between pro-environmental practices and class politics in urban India. It also illuminates the role of changing social practices in discussions of environmental politics in Bangalore.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Full quote “This is what everyone says. That no respectable middle-class adult would be caught on a bicycle. This is only for children, or for those who have no other choice. So for me to bicycle, I have to justify it. To my family, my friends, and to everyone around me” Harsha, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Bicycling is one among the many “eco-friendly”/ “green” consumption and lifestyle practices that are increasingly becoming popular among India’s elite and middle classes, particularly in its cities. Other practices include recycling, composting, urban gardening, and buying organic food and clothing.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of thrift is related to the concept of *Jugaad*, a way of “making-do” (Singh et al., 2012), “getting-by” (Jauregui, 2014) and coping with systemic risk (Birtchnell, 2011) for India’s impoverished. *Jugaad* and thrift are essential survival strategies for the poor in India.

<sup>7</sup> Bangalore, a city of over 8 million in South India, has expanded in size and population since the liberalization of the Indian economy (Nair, 2005). In the past two decades, Bangalore has transformed from a medium-size

## **Social practice theory and class identities**

Social practice theory sees social order as rooted in everyday practices (Hargreaves, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002). By situating their analysis at the level of the practice and focusing on the interactions between agency and structure, practice theorists like Bourdieu (1984), Giddens (1984) and more recently Reckwitz (2002), Warde (2005), and Spaargen (2011) provide a distinctive framework to analyze social behaviors. Decentering the individual in its formulations, practice theory moves beyond approaches anchored in behavioral economics and social psychology (Shove, 2010; Shove and Walker, 2010) to explore how multiple factors such as the mind, body, agents, objects, knowledge, norms, structures, and discourses are integrated into a set of internally-differentiated practices that are executed by skilled practitioners (Warde, 2005).

Social practice theory has been used productively to understand both how “normal” and

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city of pensioners, public sector enterprises, and small-scale industries, to a growing technology city enmeshed within circuits of global capital (Goldman, 2011). Bangalore consequently has a significant new middle class population, whose consumption practices are increasingly similar to North American and European lifestyles (Upadhyaya, 2009).



“everyday” practices come to be (Shove, 2003) and how practices can be changed (Halkier et al., 2011; Shove et al., 2012). This second theme is particularly relevant to sustainable consumption research as practice-based analyses can illuminate the pathways to transforming resource-intensive consumption patterns (Watson, 2012). By highlighting the co-shaping of individual agency and social structures, social practice theory can help devise policy options that address both individual attributes and structural variables (Røpke, 2009; Spaargen, 2011). Practice-based analyses have also highlighted the importance of considering the material and infrastructural elements of practices (Magaudda, 2011; Watson, 2012), the role of elite leadership in popularizing and normalizing new practices (Birtchnell, 2012), and how communities of practice can serve as sites of experimentation and social learning, supporting the transformation of existing resource-intensive consumption (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014).

Social practice theorists also recognize that individuals and groups, through various social formations, affect the performance, stability, and transformation of practices. Relating this to consumption practices, Warde (2005: 6) observes, “Sociological applications of the (practice) concept may deal equally with persistence and change in the form of practices and their adherents, with manifest differences in the ways in which individuals and groups

engage in the same practice, and with the social conflicts and political alliances involved in the performance and reorganization of practices.” Recognizing variations in how different groups of people perform and change a practice lays the foundation for looking at the relationship between collective identities and class politics, as expressed through everyday practices.

This mutually-constitutive relationship between practice and class identity is key to contemporary formulations of India’s middle classes as a “class-in-practice.” As Fernandes and Heller write “the contours of the (new) middle classes can be grasped 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 analysis is largely drawn from Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *field* that theorize how class structures are reproduced by social groups (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu defines the habitus as a “systems of dispositions, characteristic of the different classes and class fractions (Bourdieu, 1984: 541).” Habitus is first shaped in the intimate context of the home, where individuals are socialized into certain ways of being and interacting with the world, and acquire skills and cultural competencies. The field is the setting where these skills and dispositions are deployed and strengthened through everyday practices.

Individuals thus acquire cultural capital, which along with economic and social capital becomes the structural basis of class power. Cultural, economic, and social capital together become the means for creating and maintaining social distinction. For India's new middle classes, cultural capital, which is accumulated over multiple generations of caste endogamy and reinforced through educational experiences in elite English-medium schools and colleges, becomes the primary means of consolidating an identity as the vanguards of modernization in India (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Mawdsley, 2004).

Distinction is key to middle class identity: Because the definition of "middle class" is so ambiguous, those who want to claim this identity need to actively distinguish themselves from the lower orders, both on the street and within the home (Baviskar and Ray, 2011). These practices of distinction are dependent both on long-standing forms of caste, religion, and linguistic differences, and on new forms of consumption (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Upadhyaya, 2009; Wilhite, 2008). Consumption practices that maintain middle class distinction are particularly visible in Bangalore, where sprawling malls, gated communities, and car-clogged roads embody the new middle class lifestyle. Middle class practices of distinction include shopping in malls, wearing branded clothing (Mathur, 2010; Upadhyaya, 2009), employing domestic workers within homes (Ray and Qayuum,

2011) and of particular relevance to this study, travel by car or motorcycles on city roads (Baviskar, 2011).

### **(Auto)Mobility in the Indian City**

The personal automobile is undoubtedly a potent symbol communicating social status. “The dominant culture that sustains major discourses of what constitutes the good life (Sheller and Urry, 2000: 738),” automobility is not just a means of transportation but a “sign of adulthood, a marker of citizenship and the basis of sociability and networking (Urry, 2007: 116).” In an automobilized culture, both physical road space and social identity formation are dominated by cars, while other road users such as cyclists and pedestrians are reduced to essentialized and stigmatized identities (Aldred, 2013). With economic liberalization, Indian roads have become increasingly ruled by the personal automobile and the needs of cyclists and pedestrians have become further subordinated to those of the car-driving middle classes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This disfranchisement of cyclists and pedestrians is of course a feature of most automobilized societies. In his account of the bloody and violent early years of automobilization in the US, Norton (2011) chronicles the highly-contested conversion of street-space from a multi-use space to an automobile thoroughfare where pedestrians were confined to crosswalks and sidewalks. Pedestrians and cyclists remain marginalized in most

Cars ownership is a critical symbol of having achieved middle class respectability. As scholars writing about the urban middle classes in India observe, car advertisements play on themes of inclusion and exclusion, framing the car as the most convenient, safe, efficient, and stylish mode of transport that every Indian must aspire for (Baviskar, 2011; Wilhite, 2008). Baviskar recaps how cars perpetuate middle class distinction saying: “Cars are necessary and desirable. Those who have the wherewithal to own, drive, and ride them are, by definition, respectable citizens by virtue of their demonstrated property-owning power (Baviskar, 2011: 414).” The car-riding classes are also inured from the risks, noise, and pollution of city streets (Urry, 2004) and are able to enjoy the fruits of car consumption, without having to face its externalities. Automobiles consequently enable a distancing and displacement of responsibility for the public commons (Mitchell, 2005) and for environmental harm onto other classes (Baviskar, 2011; Mawdsley, 2004).

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US cities (Henderson, 2013). Recently, however, some US cities have begun to build cycling infrastructure like separated lanes, bicycle-share systems, and bicycle boulevards (Vivanco, 2013). Cyclists are better served in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands and in some Scandinavian cities, which have invested in extensive cycling infrastructure, and where cycling is considered an integral part of public culture and national identity (Pucher et al., 2011). There are also significant cycling movements in major South American cities (Sagaris, 2015), particularly Bogota, whose Cicilovia concept (of open streets) has been emulated in many other parts of the world (Lugo, 2013).

If the car is an integral component of middle class lifestyles, then the bicycle is an important vehicle supporting working class livelihoods. The majority of urban cyclists in India today are described as “utility” or “livelihood” cyclists (Tiwari and Jain, 2009). These terms refer to individuals who cycle more out of necessity and for utility, in contrast to those who cycle voluntarily or for recreation. India’s utility cyclists are members of the urban poor and the working classes who use bicycles to commute to work, transport goods, and access education, health care, and other services. (Srinivasan and Rogers, 2005; Tiwari, 2002). Livelihood cyclists comprise anywhere from 8% to 27% of the urban road-share (Ministry of Urban Development GoI, 2008; Tiwari and Jain, 2013).

In stark contrast to riding a car, bicycling requires an individual to intimately interface with city streets. In Bangalore and other Indian cities today, a cycle ride is rarely a pleasant activity. Forced to jostle for room with aggressive automobiles, harassed by cops, breathing polluted air, sweating in the unforgiving Indian sun, riding barely-roadworthy bicycles while transporting goods as diverse as gas cylinders or dying chickens, this is no recreational ride (Gupta, 2013). Worsening air quality and traffic congestion only exacerbates this situation (The Hindu, 2012). Non-motorized transit users often must fear

for their lives.<sup>9</sup> It is no surprise that bicycling rates in Indian cities have declined steadily with livelihood riders upgrading to motorcycles and other automobiles when possible (Nair, 2005; Tiwari and Jain, 2013).<sup>10</sup>

If the car is the symbol of modernization and “having made it”, the bicycle is its amodern antithesis. Even if the bicycle in India started off as an identifiably foreign import and served as a vehicle to acquire social status and upward mobility (Arnold and Dewald 2011, Rao 2002), the rising automobilization of Indian cities has marginalized the bicycle.<sup>11</sup>

India’s livelihood cyclists are increasingly viewed as physical impediments to the juggernaut of India’s development aspirations and a recent ban on bicycles in Kolkata is testament to how the government discriminates against this class of road users (Bera, 2013;

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<sup>9</sup> For instance in 2007, 961 persons were killed and 6591 persons injured by motor-vehicles in Bangalore, many of them cyclists and pedestrians (Rahul and Verma, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> In Bangalore, bicycling rates were as high 71 % in the 1970s, comprising both middle class and working class bicycling commuters (Nair, 2005). Today bicycles are estimated to compose anywhere from 2 to 20 % of the transportation mode share (Rahul and Verma, 2013; Tiwari and Jain, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> The bicycle presumably came to India during British rule, during which time it was used by Indian elites for recreation and racing (Arnold and DeWald, 2011). Bijker in his history of cycling technologies documents this through the following quote: “I have seen a picture in which the Maharajah of an Indian state, together with the British Resident at his court and all the great officers of the durbah are seated on tricycles at the gate of the palace, and gaze at the lens of the camera with the breathless attention usual on such occasions, Lord Abermale in a letter to Badminton Library’s Cycling Club, 1886 (Bijker, 1997: 53).” The British colonial government later encouraged bicycles for official use by postmen and other lower-level functionaries. Soon the bicycle became more widely adopted across the nation as local industries for bicycle manufacture and repair began to emerge (Arnold and DeWald, 2011).

The Economist, 2013). In Bangalore, the government has invested significant resources in enhancing automobile infrastructure by widening roads and constructing flyovers, often at the cost of pedestrian and cyclist safety (Nair, 2005). As automobility gains ground in Indian cities, dominant depictions of the middle class lifestyle as an automobilized lifestyle leave no room for the bicycle. How then are stigmatized bicycling practices being accommodated within the constellation of social practices that constitute a middle class lifestyle?<sup>12</sup>

### **Data and Methodology**

In this paper, I draw on interviews, participant observation, and online ethnography to analyze the processes by which middle class bicycling practices emerge and spread. The data presented here was collected during 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangalore. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with individuals who practice and/or promote bicycling in Bangalore.<sup>13</sup> Interviewees were identified and recruited through a

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<sup>12</sup> I use the word 'accommodate' because cycling practices rarely replace other practices like driving a car (i.e. transportation practice), or going to the gym (a health/recreational practice). Rather, they are added on and often exist in tension with other practices. It is only in a few instances where they may replace another practice, or cause ripple effects onto other domains of life (e.g. an individual who sells their car and stops eating meat, and attributes these changes to bicycling).

<sup>13</sup> While I did not ask questions about income, the education, occupation and the consumption profiles of my respondents would place them firmly within the new middle classes.



number of channels: through a mailing list of a bicycling community in Bangalore, Facebook posts, and through snowball sampling. My sample consisted of 15 men and 5 women.<sup>14</sup> Most interviews took place on a one-on-one basis either in the homes of respondents, or in public settings like coffee shops.<sup>15</sup>

Nine of my respondents were employed in the Information Technology (IT) industry either as engineers or managers, all of whom bicycled to work at least four times a week. Five others had previously worked in IT companies, but had quit their jobs in the past year or two to pursue interests around bicycling and other environmental issues. One of them, Nikhil, had started a bicycle store. Another, Karthik had left his IT job to work with the Ride-a-Cycle Foundation (RACF). One of my female informants was, when I first met her in 2011, employed in an Indian software company. By 2013, she had quit and started working for RACF full-time, while also pursuing interests in organic farming. Another female informant had also quit her IT job and was planning to start working at a bicycle

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<sup>14</sup> This breakdown does not reflect the gender balance among Bangalore cyclists overall, where men far outnumber women.

<sup>15</sup> Among my interviewees, four individuals were couples and I interviewed both members of the couple together in their respective homes.

store.<sup>16</sup> About half of my respondents identified as being “native” to Bangalore while the rest moved to the city for education or work opportunities from various parts of India. Two of my informants were “expats”, who were born and raised in Europe.

Interview questions included asking respondents about how and why they began to bicycle as adults, what kinds of trips they make (e.g. for commute, recreation, exercise, shopping etc.), barriers they face while performing the practice, what the practice means for other aspects of their daily life, and how their families and friends have responded to these changes. In addition to interviews, I attended bicycling community events. I also carried out an online ethnography, which involved tracking conversations on forums, Facebook, blog posts, media articles and other sources.<sup>17</sup> I integrate these multiple sources below, and use the social practice analytic to decipher the different dimensions of the middle class bicycling practice.

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<sup>16</sup> These individuals decided to leave their “tech” jobs to pursue interests around bicycling, sustainability, and simple living. Even though they were currently unemployed, they did not appear to be facing any financial difficulties. All three had accumulated savings from prior employment and had additional financial support from employed family members.

<sup>17</sup> The methods I used to do this follow what Kozinets refers to as ‘Netnography’. However, as I combined both online and offline interactions, my approach could be better characterized as a ‘blended netnography/ethnography’ (Kozinets, 2010).

### **Findings: The elite and ethical dimensions of middle class bicycling**

Since the mid-2000s many middle class individuals in Bangalore, most of them men in their 20s and 30s, have taken to weekend bicycle rides, rallies, and races as a popular form of recreation, and some have adopted bicycles as their main mode of commute. This renewed patronage of bicycles is evidenced by the thousands of members who post on mailing lists, Facebook groups, and blogs, and use these fora to coordinate weekend rides to outdoor destinations, discuss fitness tips, and share stories about successes and failures on two wheels.<sup>18</sup>

While I received a couple of different “origin” stories for this reinvigoration of recreational and commute bicycling in Bangalore, many pointed to transnational influences. For some individuals employed in the IT industry, work trips to California and Europe provided a glimpse into bicycling lifestyles and opportunities to ride “hi-tech” bicycles. Some of these individuals came back to Bangalore, bought mountain bikes, and started taking day-trips outside the city, charting bicycle-friendly routes and finding challenging peaks to

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<sup>18</sup> Bicycling is also becoming popular among the middle classes in other Indian cities like Delhi, Pune and Chennai (Gupta, 2013). Sunita Narain, one of India’s most prominent environmental activists, was in a bicycling accident in 2013, which brought renewed attention to the state of cyclists in Indian roads (Narain, 2013).

surmount. Others started riding in their neighborhoods, using bicycles for quick trips to shops and cafes.

Eventually the bicycling scene diversified to include racing, bicycle tours, and rides within the city for beginners and casual riders. For example, the Bangalore Bicycling Championship hosts races throughout the year for both men and women. There are several organizations that coordinate multi-day bicycle trips such as the popular Tour of Nilgiris, a week-long trip that traverses parts of the Western Ghat mountain range. Many groups organize short rides within the city for beginners, usually early in the morning when there are fewer automobiles on roads. Some recreational riders have also begun to use bicycles as their main mode of commute, often riding 40-50 kilometers on Bangalore's traffic-choked roads every day.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> While estimating the number of cyclists in Bangalore who would identify as middle class is difficult, the size of online bicycling communities provides some indication of this. For example, the Bangalore Bicycling Club Google group has nearly 5000 members, with membership increasing from year to year. The Go Green Cycling Group claims to have over 3000 registered members. While these numbers are small compared to the overall population of Bangalore, which in the 2011 census totaled 8,425,970 persons (Government of India, 2011), this evidence clearly suggests that bicycling is becoming more popular among certain sections of Bangalore's new middle classes. Data sourced from the public page of the Bangalore Bicycling Club google group, available here: <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/bangalore-bikers> (Last accessed 9/24/2014) and the Go Green Groups' website, available here: <http://www.gogreengocycling.org/> (Last accessed 9/24/2014).

These diverse cycling practices are supported by a number of high-end bicycle stores. These stores sell many types of bicycles, ranging from road bikes and hybrids to “fixies” and mountain bikes, most of them imported, along with specialized clothing, bags, and other accessories. Bangalore is also home to a number of bicycling communities like the Go-Green cycling group. Advocacy organizations like the Ride-a-Cycle Foundation work with municipal authorities to improve cycling infrastructure in the city. RACF has also helped launch bicycle-share systems with the goal of getting more people to use bicycles for short trips.

My analysis proceeds as follows: In line with Hargreaves (2011, 83), I use “Shove and Pantzar’s (2005) empirically helpful understanding of practices as assemblages of images (meanings, symbols), stuff (materials, technology), and skills (forms of competence, procedures) that are dynamically integrated by skilled practitioners through regular and repeated performance” to identify the various elements of cycling practices. I highlight the role of communities in supporting bicycling practices and in recruiting new practitioners. Developing the term *defensive distinctions*, I demonstrate how cycling becomes a “classed practice” (Aldred and Jungnickel, 2014) in Bangalore, i.e. a practice implicated in class identities and relationships.

*Images and stuff: the materiality and discourses of bicycling*

Practices have social meanings. In asking my interviewees why they became cyclists, I began to glean some of the *images*, i.e. meanings and symbols associated with cycling practices. I found that middle class cyclists drew on diverse *images* to associate their cycling practices with discourses of “cool”, fitness, and health. All my interviewees pointed to health benefits as a motivating factor, saying that bicycling increased their sense of well-being. For a sizeable majority, bicycling also represented a great way to escape Bangalore’s legendary traffic jams. Over half my respondents explicitly mentioned saving money on fuel as an added bonus, while some said they enjoyed getting ahead of cars on the road. Many interviewees pointed to an interest in environmental issues as a motivating factor. Some of these individuals had also adopted other “pro-environmental” practices such as recycling and composting waste, buying organic food, and downsizing.<sup>20</sup> This suggested that health, efficiency, speed, and environmental conservation were some of the important social meanings associated with bicycling.

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<sup>20</sup> These responses are in line with recent scholarship that asserts that individuals enter into sustainable consumption practices like bicycling for both self and other-oriented reasons (Aldred, 2010; Soper, 2007).

*Images* and *stuff* work together to recruit more practitioners into a practice. As one example of the interplay between *stuff* and *images*, the middle class cyclist presents a visual contrast to the livelihood cyclist of Bangalore. Dressed in spandex shorts, wearing special gloves, and bike helmets, many middle class cyclists look modern and sleek, much like the cyclists of the US or Europe. Some use imported bicycles that are advertised as “hi-tech” and powerful. These imported bicycles are also much more expensive than the local bicycles that working class cyclists invariably use.<sup>21</sup>

The following two interview quotes substantiate how gear and imported bicycles are used to frame cycling as cool, hip, and appropriate.

“It helps that these bicycles are expensive... people can think of them as an upgrade and not as beneath them... there are some people who are buying their first bicycle now, instead of their first car but they will do that only if it is expensive and if people around them know that they can buy a car if they want to.” Nikhil, 29

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<sup>21</sup> For example, a high-end road bicycle can cost 50,000 to 200,000 Indian Rupees (800-3200 US Dollars), while a locally made bicycle, or a cheap Chinese import is likely to cost as little as 1500 Indian Rupees (25 US Dollars). Second-hand bicycles can be even cheaper. In comparison, the price of cars in India can range anywhere from the economy Tata Nano, which costs somewhere between 100,000 to 150,000 Indian Rupees (1600-2400 US Dollars) to luxury models, some of which are priced at above 1 million Indian Rupees (16,000 US Dollars).

“...if you want them to step out of their air-conditioned car, you need to give them a cool solution. Not just status. A cool solution as in it should be fast, efficient, light-weight. Cool sexy bikes. People are busy flaunting them.” Rahul, 31

As these interview excerpts suggests, by framing bicycling as something cool, fun, efficient, and even enjoyable, advocates are able to allay some of the status concerns of potential middle class cyclists. Bicycle advocates like Nikhil and Rahul, who are both commute cyclists, emphasize how these bicycles can compete with cars on Indian roads, giving one speed, personal control and time management, but shorn of inefficient externalities like pollution or fuel costs. Bicycles also provide a means for individuals to improve themselves, by becoming healthier, thrifty, and eco-efficient.<sup>22</sup>

Imported bicycles, clothing, and gear also serve practical purposes. Imported bicycles are faster, easier to ride, and help individuals commute longer. Cycling gear provide an added dimension of safety when bicycling in traffic or on poorly lit roads. Bicycling tights and T-

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<sup>22</sup> This theme of emphasizing the status dimensions of bicycling resonates with what Aldred (2010) observes about cyclists in the UK city of Cambridge, suggesting that the middle class bicycling communities in Bangalore have much in common with cyclists in Europe in terms of how they view and motivate their practices.



shirts are more comfortable to ride in as they wick sweat away from the skin. These utilities, which are provided by expensive and often imported *stuff*, help stabilize the practice as they make the act of bicycling safer and more pleasant, and appear more akin to the cycling practices of the West than to livelihood riders in India.

In addition to signaling this discourse of cool, fitness, and health, cyclists also draw on *images* and *stuff* to showcase the ethical motivations behind their decisions to bicycle. A telling sign of this is the following text taken from the website of the Go-Green group.

“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 motor cycle/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.”<sup>23</sup>

The founder of this group is a first-generation Bangalorean who moved to the city from a

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<sup>23</sup> The rest of the text says: “IT’S A TOOL THAT MAKES OTHER’S 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 which can be accessed here: <http://www.gogreengocycling.org/why-gogreen-tee>. A picture of the Go Green T-shirt is also available on the page. (Last accessed 9/24/2014)

small town to work in the IT sector. His successful career has increased his net-worth substantially, and at one point, he owned as many as six cars, a strong sign of his having “made it.” His conversion to cycling came after he watched “An Inconvenient Truth.” He told me how he was deeply troubled by climate change and adopted bicycling as a way to reduce his environmental footprint. However, this decision was met with surprise and disapproval 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. He decided to market the T-shirt and build a movement to popularize bicycling in the city. He did this by organizing weekend morning rides. These rides, which usually last about 2 hours, take cyclists through quieter streets in the early hours of the day, before car traffic picks up. The Go-Green rides are particularly popular among novice cyclists, as it gives them an opportunity to practice bicycling in a relatively safe environment.

#### *Skills, support and shared learning: Community in Bicycling*

Bicycling in Bangalore is a risky proposition. It involves physical risks that are encountered while navigating traffic and pot-holed roads. It also comes with social risks, in the form of the disapproval that cyclists face from family members, friends, and

professional colleagues who are often skeptical and unsupportive. Coping with these risks requires that novice cyclists develop specific *skills* i.e. the forms of competence and procedures that eventually enable them become full-fledged practitioners. The online and in-person cycling groups of Bangalore function as *communities of practice* as they consist of individuals who have come together out of a mutual interest in cycling for commute and recreation. As Sahakian and Wilhite (2014) discuss, communities of practice play a critical role in changing practices, as they can expose people to new practices, allowing experimentation and shared learning.

Bangalore's cycling communities are critical spaces for social learning and skill-building, providing members with support and resources. Online communities like the Bangalore Bicycling Club serve as repositories of shared knowledge on bicycling gear, routes within and outside the city, and technical knowledge on how to repair bicycles. Members often share personal stories of riding different routes on forums. These accounts in turn serve as a resource for people who are beginning to bicycle on Bangalore's often daunting roads. Online communities extend to offline activities too. BBC members conduct bicycling workshops in workplaces and university campuses, where experienced cyclists make presentations that list the various benefits of bicycling, in terms of health, fuel costs, and

recreation, while also providing other useful information on bicycling gear and riding routes.<sup>24</sup> Members of other communities like the Go-Green cycling group help novice cyclists learn how to ride on Bangalore roads by going on bicycle rides with them, helping them buy the right type of bicycle, and troubleshooting problems. An interviewee summarizes how bicycling communities have helped her develop the skills she needed to become a regular cyclist:

“I always wanted to bicycle because I am concerned about the environment ... I tried it by myself for 2 years, but it was very hard to keep it up. Finding a community like the Bangalore Bicycling Club helped because I got a lot of practical advice and also saw that there were others doing 20 km commutes everyday... I was also able to join many people on rides, which was fun ...I realized it was possible to do this... I was facing opposition from my family as they thought cycling was not safe for women in Bangalore... by meeting other women cyclists in these groups, I was able to reassure them.” Lakshmi, 34

The emergence of bicycling entrepreneurs and activists from within these online communities has helped develop an ecosystem of services that support the bicycling practice. For example, The Bums on the Saddle bicycle store runs an online marketplace

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<sup>24</sup> A sample presentation is available online here: <http://www.slideshare.net/mynk/byke-workshop-with-bangalore-bykers-club> (Last accessed 11/16/2013)

that sells new and second-hand bicycles. They also organize workshops on bicycle maintenance and safety. Other organizations that organize weekend bicycle rides, bicycling touring, and bicycle races have emerged from within these communities, increasing the institutional support available for new and experienced practitioners.

Communities of practice also help off-set the social risks that come with adopting a stigmatized and essentialized practice (Aldred, 2013). Communities work to collectively change the images associated with bicycling practices, refashioning them as green, hip, cool, and safe. For example, in the Go-Green community, members adopt and display shared symbols like Go-Green T-Shirts and promulgate specific environmental discourses, thereby strengthening the identity of a cyclist as an ethical actor and ecological citizen. Similar to what Stehlin (2014) demonstrates in San Francisco, Internet-based bicycling groups develop collective norms and concepts of “proper cycling practice,” including notions of what types of cycles and gear are necessary for traversing Bangalore’s roads.

For many cyclists, their immediate families are not supportive of their decisions to cycle. Access to a community of like-minded practitioners helps offset censure from family and can also help recruit family members to the practice. This supportive function of cycling

community was well-illustrated during an interview with a couple: In this family, the husband was a cycling evangelist, while his wife was initially resistant to cycling and especially nervous about her husband's safety on a bicycle. She eventually started bicycling herself after she went on a few rides organized by the Go-Green cycling group. The fact that children, older people, and women went on these rides helped convince her that cycling was not an unsafe activity reserved for young men. She now cycles regularly in her neighborhood and often goes on rides with her family. She identified community as a critical factor in changing her mind. Bicycling communities thus become integral to the socialization of commute and recreational cycling as a practice appropriate and safe for middle class individuals.

*Defensive distinctions and the cultural politics of cycling practices*

Q. How did your family and friends react to your decision to start bicycling to work?"

"Actually initially some of them were surprised. Some were dismayed, since the perception is that if you can afford a car, why would you cycle? But some were quite impressed and happy that I cycle regularly." Ganapathy, 37

As the quote above illustrates, in urban India today it is normal and even necessary to buy and use a personal automobile, if one can afford to do so. If an individual intentionally decides not to do this, this action is invariably considered concerning and abnormal. Most of the cyclists I interviewed did not seek to exit “mainstream” middle class society. They were well embedded in social relations with more “traditional”<sup>25</sup> family members and friends. So if they were bicycle instead of driving cars, they had to establish that this was a “normal” practice appropriate for someone who claimed middle class identity. As Shove asserts, this symbolic and practical work that goes into maintaining or disrupting norms and traditions is by no means insignificant (Shove, 2003). To destigmatize and normalize cycling practices, Bangalore’s cyclists, working in and through community, employed *defensive distinctions* that drew on both ethics and lifestyle-based discourses.

These defensive distinctions are critical to the strength and continued expansion of bicycling practices for two reasons. Middle class identity is developed and maintained in relationship to its constitutive outside, i.e. poor others. Members of the middle classes seek

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<sup>25</sup> By “traditional” I am referring to family members who value more commonplace markers of distinction such as car consumption, educational attainment, and well-paying jobs. I also observed that these “traditional” family members were often from an older generation than the cyclists themselves. In other words, cyclists most often received censure from their parents, in-laws, aunts, uncles and older neighbors. However, this was not always the case. I did meet a few cycling grandparents during my time in Bangalore.

to distinguish themselves from the poor through their consumption and lifestyle practices (Fernandes and Heller 2006). At the same time, they make claims to speak for the common-good and in public interest (Baviskar and Ray 2011). By elevating bicycling to the same symbolic position as car ownership, while simultaneously classifying themselves as ethical subjects *within* their own class fractions, they fashion an identity that is both elite and ethical. Table 1 draws on interview quotes, online conversations, and in-person observations of cycling practices to summarize these defensive distinctions constructed by cyclists.

**Table 1: The defensive distinctions of middle class bicycling**

Defensive Distinctions	Stuff	Images	Skills
	materials and technology used in the cycling practice	meanings and symbols associated with the cycling practice	forms of competence and know-how required to perform the practice



Ethics-based	<p>Go-Green T-shirts</p> <p>Bicycles themselves</p> <p>The lack of a car/ not using an automobile everyday (non-stuff)</p>	<p>“Green Bangalore”</p> <p>“Stop climate change”</p> <p>“Say no to fuel”</p> <p>“Be responsible”</p>	<p>The knowledge to talk about climate change/ environmental problems</p> <p>Skills to perform other environmental practices- recycling, buying organic food</p>
Lifestyle-based	<p>Imported bicycles</p> <p>Specialized bicycling clothes- sweat-wicking, reflective and high performance</p> <p>Helmets and gloves</p>	<p>“Cycling makes you sexier”</p> <p>“I cycle because it is fun”</p> <p>“Cycling means you have a life”</p>	<p>Being familiar and comfortable with multiples types of bicycles- road bikes, mountain bikes, and hybrids</p> <p>Knowledge about</p>

		<p>“This is faster than using a car in Bangalore traffic”</p> <p>“Cycling is the new golf”</p>	<p>fitness and health</p> <p>benefits of cycling</p> <p>Knowledge about good bicycle routes outside the city for recreational rides</p>
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As Table 1 shows, ethics-based distinctions were made through the explicit framing of bicycling as an eco-friendly practice. By emphasizing that bicycling for the middle classes is a voluntary act adopted not just for personal benefit, but also for planetary stewardship, the practice is elevated to a status of ethical import. By talking about “going green by going cycling,” cyclists also seek to distinguish themselves from car-drivers, whose apparent apathy to environmental problems is evidenced by their continued patronage of automobiles.<sup>26</sup> Practitioners linked cycling practices with *images* of local and global environmental problems, developing the *skills* to talk about complex environmental issues

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<sup>26</sup> However this stance is not without its contradictions as many of the cyclists I interviewed (14/20) owned cars and some (8/20) used them on a weekly basis. Nevertheless, even car owners viewed their cycling as ethical practices, despite this inconsistency.

and their solutions in depth. Cycling practices were anchored in *stuff* that conveyed environmental engagement (like Go-Green T-shirts or the bicycles themselves) and also in non-stuff, i.e. in the conspicuous non-use of cars.

For my interviewees who identified as environmentalists, riding a bicycle was a way of communicating “green distinction”, i.e. a means by which they communicated their identity as eco-activists and planetary stewards (Horton, 2003, 2006). I also met individuals who had developed an awareness of and interest in environmental issues through their engagement in bicycling communities. For example, one of my interviewees, when asked about what motivates him to cycle, responded:

“Initially I was motivated by fitness and health concerns, so I used to cycle 75% of the time. Now environment has become a bigger factor, so its’ about 100%.” Gopi, 35

For this individual, his engagement in environmental issues increased after he began to bicycle and attend regular Go-Green rides. He learnt about environmental problems like climate change and biodiversity loss. Eventually, he began to adopt other pro-environmental behaviors like composting his food waste. Aldred (2010) observes a similar dynamic in Cambridge where individuals began to develop increased awareness and consciousness of environmental issues after becoming regular cyclists. This suggests that

bicycling, could in some contexts be a feeder activity to other forms of environmental engagement, particularly because it changes the ways in which individuals engage with their immediate surroundings (e.g. breathing air on the roads as supposed to riding in an air-conditioned car).

However, while bicycling was a gateway practice to environmental engagement for some, it is important to note that environmental concern was by no means universal in Bangalore's bicycling communities. For many cyclists, the environment was peripheral to their practice (7/20 of my interviewees did not think this was an important motivating factor to their bicycling practice). Instead, the lifestyle benefits of cycling were more important.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the environment was constantly invoked by all interviewees as a *justification* for their bicycling practice, i.e. even if it did not motivate their actions in the first place, it was often used to rationalize their bicycling choices later to friends and family. This idea that “going green” can buffer social status has been documented in other contexts (Griskevicius et al., 2010), and when combined with other discourses around

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<sup>27</sup> Some bicycling advocates also told me that they had begun to downplay the environment dimension in their advocacy presentations, as many audience members felt that this was too “preachy.”

health and lifestyle, undoubtedly plays a role in driving individuals to take up sustainable consumption activities (Barendregt and Jaffe, 2014).

Lifestyle-based distinctions, constructed through the use of *images* and *stuff* that highlight the conveniences, efficiencies, and pleasures of bicycling, work alongside environmental ideas to popularize bicycling. These distinctions have clear transnational connections as evidenced by the fact that practitioners ride imported bicycles, and their outfits look much more similar to what cyclists in the USA and Europe wear, than to the attire of livelihood riders. Cycling's resurgence as a practice associated with the cultural elite and with urbanist lifestyles is being witnessed in San Francisco, Chicago, and other American cities. In these spaces, municipal governments have begun to invest heavily in bicycle infrastructure, viewing this as means to creating more "livable" downtown areas (Sagaris, 2015) that are attractive to the so-called "creative class" (Stehlin, 2014; Vivanco, 2013). This link between cycling identities and "entrepreneurial" cities is becoming evident in Bangalore too, where some advocates call "cycling the new golf," linking it to ideas of innovation and entrepreneurship. Perhaps recognizing that cycling is becoming mainstream among Bangalore's much-vaulted IT community, the government is becoming more receptive to the infrastructure demands of bicycling activists, viewing them as legitimate voices in urban planning. Government support for middle class-led urban renewal projects

is not new in Bangalore, where the state has had a long record of privileging middle class voices in urban governance through elite participatory-governance schemes (Ghertner, 2011; Nair, 2013). However the fact that a municipal government that has to date prioritized car infrastructure is willing to invest time and resources in improving bicycling infrastructure in the city is clear evidence of the success of middle class bicycling's defensive distinctions.

### **Conclusion: Cycling spaces and city futures**

This article has used social practice theory as an analytic frame to show that middle class communities in Bangalore adopt and promote bicycling through the creation of *defensive distinctions*, which I define as distinctions that draw equally on lifestyle-based and ethics-based discourses to destigmatize and normalize cycling practices. In doing so it demonstrates how ethical discourses are key to consolidating environmental practices that have “low-status” connotations among groups that seek “high-status.” Analyzing the ethical dimensions of social practices is critical especially when it comes to eco-friendly practices that carry both implicit and explicit normative connotations. Considering the conditions under which social practices are actively framed as ethical acts helps understand how groups can deploy claims to the greater good to overcome social and cultural barriers,

and adopt stigmatized but environmentally-sustainable practices.

The new middle classes of India are beginning to access lifestyles that are increasingly similar to the Western model, and come with similar environmental impacts (Myers and Kent, 2003). Even though the middle classes currently represent a small fraction of the Indian population, ranging from 50 to 150 million (Baviskar and Ray, 2011), their numbers are expected to increase in the coming years, if the forecasts on India's economic growth hold true. As previously described, car ownership has emerged as one of the cornerstones of a middle class existence, and also contributes significantly to their environmental footprints. Devising alternatives to automobile use has emerged as an important priority for actors interested in reducing the environmental impacts of the middle class lifestyle. This paper shows how, in the space of a few years, bicycling in Bangalore has gone from an essentialized and stigmatized practice reserved for the poor to a practice that is cool, hip, efficient and eco-friendly, and increasingly popular. It demonstrates how social practices are changed through collective action, and has important insights for practitioners and advocates interested in reimagining mobility in the Indian city.

This paper also demonstrates how the practices of class distinctions in urban India are fluid

and constantly negotiated through individual and collective action. As the middle classes begin to identify as cyclists, they collectively change what it means to ride a bicycle in urban India, modifying its social meaning from a practice of deprivation to an act of self-improvement, enjoyment, and environmentalism. In doing so, they defend their class status and retain for themselves the privilege that their class identities afford, despite rejecting that ever-present signifier of middle class status in India- the personal automobile. However, promoting eco-friendly practices of bicycling through the creation of distinctions is ethically problematic as it depends on the *othering* of the poor. This *othering* is especially problematic in a political context where the government is highly receptive to the needs of middle class communities, but has a record of marginalizing the urban poor. Further, it deepens the *stigma* associated with poor cycling identities.

As some discussion on bicycling forums demonstrates, middle class cyclists are becoming increasingly cognizant of the limits of defensive distinctions. Some bicycling advocates who want better cycling infrastructure in the city are coming to the conclusion that for this to happen, they may need to build support and solidarity with working class cyclists, who far outnumber middle class cyclists. Other bicyclists speak of their admiration for the tenacity and physical capacity of working class cyclists, who often traverse long distances



on old, rickety bicycles carrying heavy loads. However, for a majority of Bangalore's cyclists, bicycling in of itself is not a political act of resistance to automobiles or of solidarity with the working classes. Rather it is symbolized by an "economy of enjoyment" (Stehlin, 2014: 22). This significantly limits the potential of bicycling communities to usher in more egalitarian roads and public spaces, especially as bicycling in Bangalore, like in other cities like San Francisco, is evolving into a distinctive and depoliticized middle class sub-culture. Resuscitating the bicycle's role as a vehicle of social transformation (or engendering "biketivism" in Furness's (2005) words) would require bicycling movements to move beyond exclusively elite leadership, which has been demonstrably successful in changing the social practices (Birtchnell, 2012), but has hitherto failed to include diverse perspectives.

The story of bicycling is reflective of and linked to broader transformations in Bangalore. Since the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1990, Bangalore has transformed from a mid-size city filled with public sector enterprises, small-scale industries, and educational institutions, to a large metropolis enmeshed in the circuits of global commerce. The city has grown four-fold, and the networks of roads and highways that crisscross its terrains are signs of this expansion. Contestation over public spaces have erupted at multiple times,

especially over decisions to widen roads to reduce city traffic. Bangalore's middle class cyclists are interestingly positioned in relation to these conflicts. On the one hand, being middle class and invested in particular visions of modernity, they could presumably be in favor of a more "world-class" city with highways and smooth traffic. This is indeed what numerous scholars studying the middle classes of urban India have documented; that the middle classes are invested in the creation of "world-class" cities that leave no room for the poor. On the other hand, they are also cyclists who appreciate pleasant, tree-lined avenues for their bicycling practice. As Bangalore contemplates its future, the story of bicycling could serve as an interesting counter-narrative to automobile-focused urban planning. However, the potential for bicycling practices and movements to bring about a more sustainable city will depend on the ability of middle class practitioners and activists to make broader connections to other constituencies in the city, including pedestrians, public transit users, and most importantly cyclists like the old man in the *dhoti* who rode past the rally.

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