What space for public parks in sustainable consumption corridors? Conceptual reflections on need satisfaction through social practices

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ABSTRACT
Green public spaces support human health and harbor biodiversity, but does visiting the park improve human wellbeing? We draw on interviews with 40 respondents in 3 Chennai parks to examine how green public spaces serve as inclusive areas for synergistic need satisfaction. Through qualitative interviews, we studied wellbeing by uncovering social practices and relating them to a list of nine Protected Needs, and by discussing need satisfaction with people directly. We find that green public spaces are unique satisfiers of multiple needs for diverse social groups through the performance of social practices, which involve underlying material arrangements, meanings, and competencies. In the cities of South Asia, where space is limited and selectively allocated to serve elite consumption, we argue that a practices-to-needs approach renders more complex the importance of green public spaces as a common good, compared to commercial and privatized spaces. We contribute to wellbeing and sustainable consumption studies by expanding the forms of consumption examined within consumption corridors, with “going to the park” subject to upper and lower spatial limits in urban settings. Spatial planning in consumption corridors therefore requires maximizing aggregated need satisfaction for more people, while minimizing need destruction in the interests of the few.

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Introduction
Green public spaces in the cities of South and Southeast Asia have a role to play in promoting “sustainable wellbeing,” bridging the gap between “what is needed for a safe climate and the prospects for a just and flourishing society” (Gough 2017, 12). Compared to other uses of limited urban land, such as shopping malls which prioritize elite consumption and can be exclusive, green public spaces are potentially more accessible, less energy intensive, and less consumerist. Research has demonstrated that parks provide health benefits, and therefore lack of access, often experienced by lower income groups, is a social justice issue (Lee and Maheswaran 2011; Mitchell and Popham 2008; Maas et al. 2006). Natural environments have been found to contribute to happiness (MacKerron and Mourato 2013) and urban green spaces have also been studied in relation to other forms of wellbeing (Benton et al. 2018). Parks enable people to meet and exchange freely, be in contact with natural environments, and gain livelihood.

Despite these demonstrated social benefits, urban green public spaces are under threat, primarily because cities are important sites for speculative investment in our current economic system (Goldman 2011), where the needs of capital are placed above all else (Wilhite 2016). Clean air or water, shaded respite from the heat, or spaces for children to play are not given the same importance as commercial interests, and neither are the needs of the urban poor for places to live and work. We concur with Rao and Min (2017, 20) that adequate public space is a material prerequisite for human wellbeing, “to foster a sense of freedom, for the pursuit of leisure activities, and to congregate for political and social activities.” The urgency for protecting these spaces is demonstrated continuously, through for example the wave of demonstrations and media attention in 2013 around plans to build a commercial center in Istanbul’s Taksim square, one of the few remaining green spaces in the city center. The social distancing measures implemented in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic also reveal the significance of green public spaces, in deepening the divide between those who could access outdoor private spaces and those who could not and were deprived of parks and waterfronts in city centers.
When urban space is both limited and selectively allocated to serve elite consumption or for the investment of surplus capital, we advance the notion that territorial development plans must consider “consumption corridors” (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014), or upper and lower limits to the “consumption” of space. Within consumption corridors, human needs are satisfied in relation to available resources: upper limits denote the boundary above which satisfying the needs of one person would harm the ability for another to satisfy their needs; lower limits denote boundaries under which no needs are satisfied (see the Introduction to this special issue). Our article advances the consumption corridors concept by expanding the forms of consumption that are included and examined within corridors, specifically the consumption of space (Urry 1995). By studying green public spaces within the overall framework of consumption corridors, we begin with the hypothesis that “consuming” green public spaces can meet multiple needs for a diversity of people—in ways that a commercial center may not.

To understand how and in what way needs are met, it is necessary to uncover what practices people engage in while visiting green public spaces and how this relates to need satisfaction. Based on an analysis of 31 interviews with 40 respondents in three parks in Chennai located in southeastern India, we examine the ways in which green public spaces are practiced to satisfy multiple needs. We draw on Max-Neef (1991) in understanding green public spaces as “synergistic” satisfiers, in their ability to meet multiple protected human needs. In doing so, we demonstrate how using a social practice theory approach to studying need satisfaction enables the identification of interrelated elements—material arrangements; social norms and institutions; and skills, competencies, and emotions—that enable or impede need satisfaction. We thus contribute to advancing a new methodological approach to studying sustainable wellbeing within consumption corridors through our use of a social practice analytic, further described below.

A final question is also explored, one that relates to consumption corridors as constituting inclusive, socially just, and democratically determined upper and lower limits. In operationalizing the concept of consumption corridors in our study of green public spaces, we note how decisions around the planning and using of space reflects contentious politics. A focus on the power-laden and antagonistic politics of urban planning troubles the convivial understanding of participation and deliberation that underpins many notions of how sustainable transformations can be achieved (Fuchs et al. 2016; Anantharaman, Huddart-Kennedy, and Middlemiss 2019). We thus explore how need satisfaction by one social group can conflict with need satisfaction by others, in relation to who is using the green public spaces and in what way, and reflect on how these conflicts map onto existing inequities in access to space and voice in urban planning decisions.

In the next section, we begin by outlining a conceptual framework that includes social practice approaches, notions of wellbeing, and a discussion of the processes and politics of park planning and management. We then introduce our methodology and the research site of Chennai in southeastern India. In our discussion of research results, we illustrate how and in what way needs are satisfied in three urban parks. Finally, we conclude with a reflection around the relevance of studying the consumption of space in relation to upper limits and wellbeing, or consumption corridors.

**Conceptual framework**

We discuss in this section how we understand social practices in relation to parks and consumption, our theoretical approach to wellbeing through the notion of Protected Needs, and how our object of study relates to urban planning and the politics of space.

**Linking consumption to social practices**

We understand “visiting the park” as involving acts of consumption such as the acquisition, appropriation, and possible appreciation of space, following Warde (2005, 137) who defines consumption as “a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion.”

While sociological approaches to consumption may have focused in the past on the more visible artifacts of consumption—how consumption can be understood as a form of symbolic value, coded for communication, or consumption as a form of social reproduction—the act of visiting a park may be less amenable to an analysis based on either material culture or social distinction approaches. Another framework is needed for understanding park usage as a nexus of activities (e.g., walking, playing, and doing nothing) that involves embodied knowledge and material arrangements. We build on Schatzki (1996, 2001) in considering “visiting the park” as an integrative practice, made up of doings and sayings,
which involve “embodied, materially mediated arrays, and shared meanings” (Schatzki 2001, 3).

To operationalize the concept of practices, and building on different approaches to practice theory, we set out to understand how the following elements come together in “visiting the park,” and related activities: material arrangements, social norms and institutional arrangements, and skills, competencies, and emotions. This relates to the notion of teleoaffective structures (Schatzki 2001), or a pattern of orientations toward goals (teleo) and motivational engagement through emotions (affect). In this way, we see acts of consumption as moments of practices that are spatially bound. Different types of spaces, with their attendant material arrangements, social norms, social relations, and representations, enable and sanction different ways of doing and being. Decisions around what types of spaces are developed in cities are shaped by a range of economic, political, and cultural considerations, in turn permitting and prioritizing some acts of consumption over others.

Linking practices to need satisfaction

In a world of resource and space constraints, the notion of consumption corridors is a salient one that requires a society which ensures that all human beings, now and in the future, can satisfy their needs toward leading a good life. Built on objective theories of wellbeing and an intensive review of the literature, Di Giulio and Defila (2020) have developed a list of what they term “Protected Needs,” or needs that can be protected by society whereby “individuals and states have an obligation to provide conditions under which people can—now and in the future—satisfy their objective needs, and/or conditions that do not make it impossible to satisfy these needs” (Di Giulio et al. 2012). We engaged with this list of nine Protected Needs, as presented in Appendix 1, to understand parks as potential satisfiers (see Sahakian et al. 2020 for a further description of the list, building on Di Giulio and Defila 2020).

Satisfiers involve products, services, and infrastructures—which draw on resources—and that are tied up with institutional arrangements, rules, and normative arrangements, which vary across space and time; in this way, they are contextually specific, unlike the list of Protected Needs, which have the ambition of being universal. Max-Neef (1991) identified different satisfier types, based on whether they (1) satisfy a need, (2) are detrimental to the satisfaction of one or more needs, termed “destroyers,” (3) can potentially fulfill more than one need, or (4) are dispensable for the satisfaction of a need. Synergistic satisfiers are thus “those that satisfy a given need, simultaneously stimulating and contributing to the fulfillment of other needs” (Max-Neef 1991, 34). We begin with the hypothesis that parks have the potential to be synergistic satisfiers.

In the same way that “visiting the park” is a practice, we understand the fulfillment of human needs as being made up of a set of activities which, in the bounded space of a city park, involve the different elements of a practice outlined above. Let us take, for example, the third need: To live in a livable environment. The description of this need involves having the possibility “to live in an environment (built and natural) that is not harmful to health and is esthetically pleasing; to develop a sensorial and emotional relationship with nature; and to have access to and be able to move about in diverse natural and cultural landscapes” (Di Giulio and Defila 2020, 110).

This series of activities, in the park space, is how the satisfaction of needs are enacted (see Figure 1). Thus, by understanding how people practice the park, we can uncover how and in what way certain needs are being met, not only in relation to how people represent the importance of the park in their lives, but also in relation to these interrelated elements: (1) people’s skills, competencies, and emotions (e.g., what they like or dislike about visiting the park, how they feel about being in different areas, their favorite or least favorite spots, where they feel safe or unsafe, what they value as meaningful to their lives, drawing on the notion of teleoaffectivity, combining goals, and emotions); (2) material arrangements of these spaces (e.g., lighting, infrastructure, and other facilities; landscaping; and park accessibility within the city); and 3) social norms and regulations (e.g., explicit rules or implicit

![Figure 1. The enactment of social practices and inter-related elements of practices toward meeting Protected Needs.](image-url)
guidelines about what people can or cannot do in the space, who can or cannot use the space and in what occurrence). Focusing on the dynamic relationship between these elements of practices enables us to draw clear links to policy and planning processes, as material arrangements, social norms and regulations, and to a lesser extent, skills, competencies, and emotions, are generated and governed by political processes.

The project from which the data reported here were gathered sets out to uncover how consumption of green public spaces can be apprehended as a “satisfier” toward meeting one or several Protected Needs, while going beyond what people state or believe, to uncovering how and in what way people practice the park. This has implications for urban planning: if a park must be practiced in a certain way to satisfy needs, then the proper planning and development of such spaces must account for the multiple dimensions of practices. It is not sufficient, for example, to consider solely the biodiversity of a park without accounting for the park benches available, as well as the rules governing what is allowed or not in the park. This raises questions about for whom parks are important need satisfiers, a question to which we now turn.

**Linking need satisfaction to the politics of urban planning**

Decisions about how urban space is allocated to different uses can have profound impacts on the lives of people. For a park to function as a synergistic satisfier it needs to be planned in a manner that focuses on need satisfaction of diverse park users, as well as the (natural, cultural, or institutional) resources available. Thus, we must also ask, who plans park spaces and in what way? How are the practices of planning parks carried out and how do they reflect different interests? Importantly, any discussion about the planning of urban space and parks has to begin with an acknowledgement that land-use planning practices in the cities of the global South have prioritized creating spaces suitable for capital accumulation and for projecting an image of modern, world-class cities, at the expense of the development of such spaces must account for the multiple dimensions of practices. It is not sufficient, for example, to consider solely the biodiversity of a park without accounting for the park benches available, as well as the rules governing what is allowed or not in the park. This raises questions about for whom parks are important need satisfiers, a question to which we now turn.

Across countries, green public spaces are planned and actualized by a diversity of governmental and non-governmental actors (Byrne and Wolch 2009), while green space provision remains non-statutory in many countries. The lack of strategic long-term planning, combined with a dearth of data on the quantity and quality of existing green spaces in cities has been identified as a challenge in planning, developing, and maintaining green public spaces, especially in the context of urban densification and expansion (Haaland and Konijnendijk van den Bosch 2015; Schäffler and Swilling 2013). Planners use provision criteria to ensure that urban green spaces are safe and secure; well maintained, designed, and constructed; appropriately located; socially relevant; and physically accessible. However, the interplay of factors that shape the capacity of local government to supply green spaces has not been investigated systematically, particularly outside North American and European cities (Boulton, Dedekorkut-Howes, and Byrne 2018; see Schuette and Chelleri 2016 for a discussion around the greening of Seoul).

Whether public parks serve as inclusive spaces is further complicated in India by the fact that elite and middle-class voices dominate urban planning processes in contemporary cities (Ghertner 2015). Exclusionary urban development at a city-wide scale has been actively encouraged by city and state governments that have set up several elite participatory mechanisms to elevate the role of corporate capital and propertied middle- and upper-class residents, while dismissing the concerns of slum dwellers and other members of the urban poor (Ellis 2012). Thus, only a specific subset of the urban population has been allowed to participate in these planning practices, leading to issues of social injustice (Anguelovski et al. 2019).

Public space and park-making efforts have both reflected and constructed socio-ecological and ethno-racial relations of power in cities (Byrne and Wolch 2009; Zimmer et al. 2017). One of the key points of ethno-racial tension in the post-colonial city lies in the long-standing discussion around modernity and public space. Colonial and nationalist projects of social reform in India have forced the notion that Indians do not know how to behave in “public space” (here seeing public space in of itself as a modernist notion), bringing their private matters and private selves into the public (Chakrabarty 1991). Therefore, one of the key disciplining mechanisms of the city is to create norms and codes of aesthetics, order, and cleanliness that reflect the ideals of urban “world-class” modernity, a project that has been adopted and championed by the urban middle classes and elite social groups, who are also its high-consuming populations (Baviskar 2011).

Communicating and enforcing norms of behavior in public spaces have been the mechanisms of
enacting this discipline, something that can be seen by the presence of signs and posters that instruct people not to spit, defecate, or be intimate in public spaces. As Baviskar (2018) and Ghertner (2011, 2015) have documented via their studies of world class city-making in Delhi, the punishments for flouting these elite-spoused norms can be severe, if not fatal (Baviskar 2003, 2018). For instance, a young man in Delhi was beaten to death for defecating in the park by residents of an upscale apartment complex. In another situation, slum residents who lived opposite a public park were barred entry by the security guards because of the “nuisance” they were creating through their very presence (Ghertner 2015). We join Wilhite (2016, 24) in reflecting on the need to account for, and indeed break, the “bad habits of capitalism” by recognizing how park planning is also entrenched in modernist and capitalist principles and thus “immersed in an inter-locking set of narratives, materialities, and incentives that has embedded the seeds of growth and accumulation in many of the practices of everyday lives.”

At the scale of the city and for Chennai, plans to create new parks often involve the removal of informal settlements or slums where the poor and working class live, or involve the loss of existing commons, such as riverbeds or seasonal lakes. For example, a recent decision to create an eco-park on the banks of the Adyar River in Chennai resulted in the expulsion of several hundred households and small businesses that existed along the riparian corridor. Plans to restore waterways and to create urban parks around the Cooum River in Chennai propose the eviction of slum dwellers, most of whom are being relocated to the outskirts of the city, far away from their means of livelihood and familiar communities (Coelho and Raman 2010; Coelho 2018). In each of these instances, the creation of a green public space has involved the forcible restriction of access. The eco-park, for instance, is only open for a few hours during the day and accessible primarily to upper middle-class and elite users who can drive to the park, which is not easily reachable via public transit. The acquisition of land purportedly for green spaces is also sometimes combined with commercial development. This suggests that the creation of public spaces can be used as an excuse to open up lands occupied by the poor to real-estate development, as observed in the case of the Citi Center Mall in Chennai (Coelho 2018). Promoting inclusive and accessible parks as an alternative to the hegemony of shopping malls and without population displacement becomes all the more relevant in this context.

**Methods and research setting**

This section introduces our methodological and analytical approach toward uncovering social practices that achieve the normative goal of need satisfaction and then profiles the three parks and how they are situated within the context of Chennai (formerly, Madras), a city in southeastern India.

**Methodological approach to studying parks in relation to practices and wellbeing**

Our qualitative study, as analyzed for this article, consisted of a two-pronged approach for understanding park practices as satisfiers toward meeting Protected Needs and is based on interviews that took place directly in three parks and among frequent park users in Chennai (January 2019—August 2019). First, we asked people to describe their routine park practices. Social practices were used as an analytical device toward identifying and describing the different, interrelated elements of practice that come to the fore and to relate them to what needs are being satisfied and in what way. Second, we asked people to reflect on a list of Protected Needs presented in the Appendix (based on Di Giulio and Defila 2020). The list was presented in a visual form and translated into Tamil for use in Chennai. Asking people to engage with a list of needs can be problematic, as people in parks are not always disposed to reflect on such topics. Through this dual approach, we were able to gain a robust understanding of what main needs are being met by the park as a satisfier, and what “elements of the practice” need to be in place for people to engage in the activities that satisfy needs. In addition, this approach was complemented through participant photography (see Allen 2012 for an introduction to this method), whereby respondents engaged in taking pictures in the park—which represent people’s most or least favored aspects of the space.

We conducted 31 interviews with 40 respondents across three parks: Anna Nagar Tower Park, Nageshwar Rao Park, and Perambur Park. A total of eight interviews were conducted in a group context, where the respondent was accompanied by friends or family. Almost all of the interviewees reported coming regularly to the park, at least once a week, and often spent at least two to three hours per visit. Our sampling strategy was designed to account for diversity among the respondents in terms of social class, gender, and age; this was achieved by visiting the park at different times of the day and week. Table 1 captures the linguistic, class, and gender composition of the sample. Interviews were conducted either in Tamil or English, based on the preference of the respondents,
and sometimes in a combination of both languages. The contents of the interviews were then translated (when needed), transcribed, and coded for analysis. Following this stage, interviews took place in December 2019 with seven stakeholders involved in urban park planning and promotion, including environmental organizations, governmental officials, and urban planners—to discuss findings around green public spaces as unique satisfiers for meeting needs, and to learn more about how park planning, design, and maintenance plays out in Chennai.

**Introducing the research sites: three parks in Chennai, India**

Chennai, formerly known as Madras, is one of the largest cities in India with a population of approximately 7 million people. Located on the coast, the city has experienced significant growth and expansion since the liberalization of the Indian economy in the late 1980s and is now home to several technology parks that host multinational and Indian corporations. The emergence of new economic sectors has enabled the growth of consumer culture in the city, as evidenced by several shopping malls that have cropped up across its landscape. In keeping with other cities in India, Chennai’s urban development has been exclusive and exclusionary (Arabindoo 2010). As the city has grown, amenities for the middle and upper classes in the form of gated complexes, shopping malls, and other leisure activities have grown, often at the expense of spaces to live and work for the poor and working classes. Thus, in Chennai—as well as in most other Indian cities—space is set aside for elite consumption just as it is taken away from less powerful social groups.

Given Chennai’s constrained coastal location, dry climate, population growth, and intense real-estate development, it is no surprise that green spaces are at a premium. The city has green cover of 15%, lowest among all the metropolitan cities in India, and significantly less than the 33% stipulated in national forest policy (Chaitanya 2018). The Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) is the statutory body tasked with management of land use and development in the city. The CMDA develops masterplans that provide guidelines for development, including guidelines on open-space reservations. While the city’s planning regulations stipulate that 10% of any newly developed area should be kept aside as an “open space reservation,” these spaces are often encroached upon by private developers or are not developed into green spaces. The parks that do exist are often poorly maintained. We initially shortlisted six parks from the 525 listed parks in the city, chosen for their diversity in location, user groups, and material arrangements. Following initial site visits, we selected three popular parks as our research sites. Given that the explicit goal of the study was to examine park usage practices, we identified parks that were frequented by diverse social groups and people who visited the parks regularly.

The first, Anna Nagar Tower Park (15 acres), is one of the city’s largest green spaces and one of its most well-maintained and frequented public spaces. The park was established in 1968 as part of the World Trade Fair held in the city that year. Anna Nagar, the locality where the park is sited, emerged around the park as Chennai’s first planned township in the 1970s and is today one of the most expensive neighborhoods in the city, home to members of its political and economic elite. However, the park’s significant size and location in the otherwise green space-deprived erstwhile industrial suburbs of North Madras means it attracts visitors from beyond the immediate neighborhood, as revealed by the park users who participated in our study.

Our second site was Nageshwara Rao Park (2.7 acres), located in the commercial center of Chennai and in the historic neighborhood of Mylapore, home to both middle- and lower-middle-class families, as well as several informal settlements. The park was created over 60 years ago from an in-filled pond, on land that once belonged to a wealthy family. While we were unable to uncover specific details about the use of the pond before the creation of the park, oral histories conducted with long-term residents of the neighborhood indicated that the pond had become a dumping site for garbage, and establishment of the park was advocated as a way to address this problem. Additionally, at the time of the development of this green space, various state and parastatal bodies in the city of Chennai were actively involved in a campaign to eliminate centuries-old engineered tanks and seasonal lakes known as eris through infilling as a means of enhancing the supply of housing, infrastructure, and institutions (Coelho 2018). These factors point to a tension where one type of commons was sacrificed to create other types of social infrastructure. Today,

### Table 1. Overview of respondent sample in three Chennai parks.

| Interview category             | Anna Nagar (N = 15) | Nageshwara Rao (N = 14) | Perambur (N = 11) | Total |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Elite/upper-middle class      | 4                   | 5                      | 2                 | 11    |
| Middle/lower-middle class     | 9                   | 7                      | 5                 | 21    |
| Lower/working class           | 2                   | 2                      | 4                 | 8     |
| Women                         | 8                   | 8                      | 6                 | 22    |
| Men                           | 7                   | 6                      | 5                 | 18    |
| Interview in Tamil            | 9                   | 6                      | 9                 | 24    |
| Interview in English          | 6                   | 8                      | 2                 | 16    |
Nageshwar Rao Park, while smaller in size than Anna Nagar Park, also attracts a diversity of park users for a variety of activities, and has recently become the site of weekly music concerts organized by a private company and catering mostly to the neighborhoods’ Brahmin elite. Both of these parks also have several old-growth trees and ample amounts of shade.

The third park that we studied is the Murosoli Maran Park, also known as Perambur Flyover Park (4.5 acres), located in the working-class industrial area of Perambur. Unlike Anna Nagar Tower Park or Nageshwar Rao Park, Perambur Park is much newer, and was created when the Perambur flyover (or viaduct) complex was completed in 2010, using land acquired during the construction process. It is nestled underneath a series of crisscrossing elevated expressways and consists of two distinct green spaces separated by a busy railway line. Unlike the first two parks, Perambur has less shade and is noisier due to its proximity to busy roads. All three parks offered a range of amenities, such as walking paths, play areas for children, outdoor gym equipment for adults, stone or metal benches for sitting, bench areas to gather in groups, as well as land set aside for food vendors immediately outside the park gates.

Results: green public spaces as meeting multiple needs, through practices

We now describe how the parks meet needs, how practicing parks make this possible, and what this means for parks as a collective good that can be planned for and protected.

Green public spaces related to as synergistic satisfiers in discourse

The consumption of green public spaces is a moment in practice that meets six different needs, in reference to the list of nine Protected Needs presented in Appendix 1. As expected, most respondents agreed that their activities in the park relate to the need to live in a livable environment (Need 3), citing the importance of trees in providing shade and aesthetics beauty, and the fresh and clean air of the park—particularly as contrasted to the busy street environment. The lack of noise is also seen as part of a pleasurable environment along with the sound and fresh feeling associated with water fountains. As a 25-year-old man, with a Bachelor’s degree and studying for government service exams explained, “roads, rooms ellame rombha congested a feel pannuvoom, inge naange freeya walk pannalaam, nalla muchi vaangalaam,” which roughly translates to “being on the roads and in our rooms is congested, here we can walk freely and breathe well,” going on to stress that it is the fresh air and the sunlight which make the park unique, when compared to other spaces.

Many respondents also identified with Needs 6 and 7, which respectively relate to (6) the need to perform activities valuable to them (that they consider fulfilling, including idleness) and (7) the need to be part of a community, or to maintain social relationships with others, to take part in cultural activities and celebrations, and to participate in associations. To provide more detail on Need 6, the activities performed were: doing nothing in particular; watching people; meeting friends; exercising; and discussing current affairs. In terms of Need 7, coming together as a community, some come with groups, some come alone, but all enjoy the feeling of being with other park users. For many, the park is a space where you congregate to communicate—whether that is with people you already know such as your neighbors or family members or with occasional acquaintances or even strangers.

The park enables both casual and intimate communicative interactions in a way that other spaces in the city do not. For example, two young male friends came to the park at the end of a long day of studying to talk with each other, but also to watch the children and families at play, something which they identified as making them feel connected and “not depressed.” A 79-year-old man who came to the park daily for exercise and to meet his friends said these morning jaunts, that culminate with a street-side coffee with his buddies, were the highlight of his retired life. During a visit to the park in February 2019, two communal activities could be observed: a group of young girls celebrating together, with a male friend or boyfriend looking on, and a group of adults sitting on a grassy area in the shade, holding what seemed to be an organized discussion or meeting.

The respondents indicated that the park enabled them to carry out activities that they would not have been able to do in other places. Especially attractive was the ability to pass the time, without any form of monetary exchange and the sense of freedom experienced in the park, as opposed to being at home or in other spaces. In addition, associated to these features was the sense that they could behave in a manner as they wished, without encountering judgment. For example, in a group interview with three women in their early 20s working in sales, one of them expressed: “If I sat with ten of my friends in my house to have a
conversation, I would get kicked out. We can talk freely in a way here that we cannot talk elsewhere.” She then went on to explicitly compare the park space with a shopping mall (where they had just been), saying “In a mall you cannot laugh or talk loudly. And if you don’t buy anything, they kick you out. Here there are no such restrictions.”

A 35-year-old working class woman visiting the park by herself echoed these sentiments saying “I feel safe here. No one bothers me. I can spend the whole day in the fresh air and be free.” When we came up to interview her, she was lying on a stone bench, listening to music on her cell phone. Appreciating how the park enabled her to be at ease in her body, she said “a person from my social class would not feel comfortable spending the day in a mall. Here I can be as I like. No one cares.”

A 33-year-old working class mother who spent her Saturday at the park with her 7-year-old child said that her youngster had nowhere to run and play near their small house, located in a dense neighborhood. If he did play, the neighbors made comments about the noise and disturbance. Coming to the park for her was a way of giving her child freedom to play without judgment, something that allowed her to relax and de-stress as well. Thus, the park enabled respondents to spend extended quantities of time in a space where they felt both physically safe and free from having to abide the opinions of others, as well as free to move about and sit as they pleased.

To a lesser extent, some respondents attributed the following additional Protected Needs to the park: to realize their own conception of daily life (Need 2), to develop as a person (Need 4), and to be granted protection by society (Need 9). As one woman in a group explained, “When we come to the park, we have happiness, we can speak loudly, we are jolly, we are with our friends, stress free,” associating these qualities with a fulfillment of Need 4. Another 60-year-old, upper middle-class retired woman said, “I meet new people in the park. Talk to them. Learn new things. This contributes in developing my ideas and views.” Even if the respondents did not refer explicitly to these needs, they nonetheless expressed some of them being fulfilled when they described their park practices. For example, the general sense that all respondents felt unencumbered and less judged in the park implies that Needs 2 and 4 were being met. Further, most of our interviewees unequivocally stated that they felt safe in the park (oftentimes alluding to the visible presence of a police officer, the police vehicle parked at the gate, a security camera, or generally to the fact that there were many people around), which can be related to Need 9.

**Green public spaces as synergistic satisfiers enabled in practice**

In this section, we use social practices as a linking concept to demonstrate how people meet Protected Needs in green public spaces through the performance of practices. We uncover the different and interrelated elements of practice including material arrangements; social norms and understandings of rules; and people’s competencies, skills, and emotions (see Figure 1). We also describe the interlocking practices that come together in the park—such as performing sports activities, engaging in leisure activities, or caring for children.

For practices to be enacted, different elements must come together. The material arrangements of the park emerged quite strongly as critical elements, in relation to skills and competencies. Having park benches to sit on, having trees for shade, and accessing walking paths for exercising, play equipment for children, and exercise equipment for adults, as well as potable water and toilets that enable people to spend significant amounts of time in the park emerged as important facilities. All of these features have an important role to play in how a diverse set of people practice the park. Further, all respondents felt that the government, specifically the municipal government and its designated contractors, had a role to play in maintaining these park facilities. As mentioned above, a visible sense of security—through the presence of a police car or video camera—also plays a role in how people feel in this space.

The meanings of park practices, or norms and regulations governing this park, are in some ways quite explicit. Notable examples include the park closing time or visible signs stating that littering is forbidden. There is also an implicit sense of what behavior is acceptable or not in such a space. Sleeping on park benches was identified by several respondents as not acceptable, along with smoking and drinking. One very interesting form of social transgression is the coupling or romantic exchanges that go on, particularly in areas of the park that are a bit secluded, and off the beaten path. Here, couples can be seen in intimacy—in pairs, either hugging and talking closely, or kissing. While park respondents state that this type of behavior is not allowed (called “public display of affection”), they nonetheless tolerate such activity—recognizing that couples have no other spaces to conduct their courtship.

The emotions evoked by respondents in relation to park practices were quite strong and clear in relation to teleoaffections, or emotions and beliefs. As one 65-year-old respondent put it, “the park is everything for us. It is like my mother and father”
(an interesting statement, as her mother was sitting right next to her at that very moment). A young girl explained that this is where she comes because it holds good memories for her, reminiscing about fond recollections of the past, as life celebrations take place in the park. Finally, several respondents said that, in the park, they experienced peace of mind: the park is a space where their worries and stress are suspended, temporarily, offering them a level of respite. When asked how they would feel if the park was taken away, most had strong reactions. Some would not let it happen and they would actively organize to resist such a change. Others expressed the sadness they would experience, as the park is a unique space for them. A 35-year-old woman explained that she could then go to the beach, but it lacks shade, and she was more likely to be bothered by other people there, meaning vendors and men. Being at the beach did not compare to the peace of mind she experienced in the park.

Green public spaces as synergistic and inclusive satisfiers

These findings affirm our hypothesis that green public spaces have the potential to be an inclusive space for synergistic need satisfaction for multiple social groups in the city. As several of our interviewees indicated and our observations suggested, the parks permitted a wider range of activities, and a sense of possibility and freedom beyond what was experienced in other spaces in the city, such as in cafes and restaurants, shopping malls, or even in one’s own home or neighborhood. The benefits of the space were especially important to our working class and lower-middle class respondents who lived in small homes and high-density neighborhoods where they did not have easy access to privacy, whether indoors or outdoors. These groups also felt the least comfortable in the glitzy malls designed for elite consumption. Our observations of park use and activities also suggested that the park was utilized by a diverse set of people, in terms of gender, age, and socio-economic background.

However, need satisfaction by one social group can conflict with need satisfaction by others. At the scale of individual parks, park associations have tended to be created by and composed of elite and middle-class park users who use parks for exercise, often at the exclusion of other park stakeholders such as vendors who may only sell goods outside the park, or poor people who might use parks for other purposes. In Chennai, conflicts around appropriate use of public space have occurred when the Marina Beach walkers’ association attempted to have rules passed denying fisherfolk access to the beach, claiming their work and presence disrupted their recreational activities (Arabindoo 2010). In Nageshwar Rao Park, elderly park users (who are also in this case upper class and upper caste), have long complained about children from the neighboring slum playing cricket in the park, claiming their games pose a threat to their health (via flying balls, for example).

In some of our interviews with elite park users, we observed the tendency to sanction or criticize the park-usage behavior of lower-income park users, particularly those of working-class men and boys from neighboring slums, echoing previous studies on park conflicts in Delhi and elsewhere (Baviskar 2003; Arabindoo 2010). For example, in Perambur Park, one interviewee took a photograph to direct our attention to the ladder used by young men from the neighboring slum to enter and exit the park quickly (Figure 2). The respondent connected their presence in the park to second- or third-hand reports of theft and harassment and suggested that teenagers and young men from the slum should not be allowed to come into the park. In Nageshwar Rao Park, two middle-class men in their twenties pointed out a couple of beer bottles hidden inside a tree, arguing that the park guards should do a better job prohibiting working-class men from sleeping and drinking in the park. In both cases, the interviewees assumed that the perpetrators for the unwanted activity were working-class men, even though they did not have direct evidence that this was the case.

Figure 2. Demonstrating “undesirable” access to the park from a neighboring slum. Note: The picture was taken by an interviewee at Perambur Park (Male, 24, lower-middle class) who captioned it as “Slum boys are using this ladder to jump inside the park and bag-snatch at night. Here camera needs to be fixed to solve this issue.”
In Anna Nagar Tower Park, we witnessed a more egregious attempt at excluding poor men from the facility. During an interview with an upper-middle-class man who was active in the park users’ association, we were approached by a homeless man who appeared to also be drunk, asking for some food or money. Our interviewee immediately called the security guards and asked them to physically throw the man out of the park, purportedly for the safety of women like us. While the assumed illegalities of the poor in the park were forcefully condemned or sanctioned, elite illegalities were ignored. For instance, several respondents mentioned to us that a section of Anna Nagar Tower Park had been encroached upon by a private club, but that because the club was patronized by elites, no one had dared to issue a complaint.

The instances where the presence of working-class and poor men was sanctioned as desirable in the park space was when they were seen as engaging in some sort of productive or purposeful activity. For example, Nageshvara Rao Park hosts practice sessions by a hip-hop dance troupe from the local Kapali thottam or slum. The leader of the troupe told us that the park guards, park users, and municipality representatives were generally supportive of the dance troupe using the park space to practice and teach dance as they assumed this kept the dance troupe using the park space to practice and teach dance as they assumed this kept the “slum boys” out of trouble. We also observed groups of young men in all three parks playing sports such as football (soccer) and badminton. Several interviewees affirmed that they were supportive of these activities as they understood that young people, especially those growing up in slums, needed and deserved access to public green spaces for recreation. This observation suggests that while there are social tensions in the park around who is allowed to use these spaces and in what ways, there is also an ethic of accommodation. Almost all our respondents agreed, for example, that young people, particularly working class, lower-middle class, and the poor, had almost no other spaces in the city to conduct courtship, and therefore it was important to accommodate those activities by not sanctioning or criminalizing them.

**Green public spaces toward “sustainable wellbeing”**

If parks have the potential to be synergistic and inclusive satisfiers of Protected Needs, what more can be said in relating wellbeing to environmental sustainability through green public spaces—in addition to the social justice issues raised above? We have already cited the importance of parks as pleasurable natural environments. If many respondents in the Chennai study described the park to be a unique space because of the “clean, fresh air,” they also emphasized that it was “uniquely cool.” It is thus not solely the less restrictive nature of green public spaces and the natural setting that is appealing to people, but also the shade that is provided by greenery that makes parks attractive, as mentioned by several respondents. The park is further differentiated from the beach in this respect, as it offers more shade. Green public spaces therefore contribute to experiences of microclimate diversity in the cities of South and Southeast Asia (Sahakian 2014, 2018), countering the normalization of air-conditioned spaces as the sole forms of leisure and comfort. Although our study did not seek to uncover what needs are met by whom in the ubiquitous shopping mall, and we recognize the value of these air-conditioned spaces as offering respite from the heat and humidity, we can safely assume that parks satisfy more needs with less material and energy resources than malls. They also serve to attenuate the urban heat-island phenomenon—whereby city centers are noticeably hotter than surrounding areas, due to built infrastructures (such as roads and air-conditioned spaces) and human activities, including motorized forms of mobility. This has implications for urban planning: if fewer resources are necessary for designing and maintaining cool and refreshing microclimates through green public spaces, then further research could investigate whether and in what way commercial complexes or green public spaces are preferable satisfiers for meeting multiple needs. Commercial facilities may be more profitable for some people, but they most likely will not satisfy as many needs as parks for more people.

**Discussion and conclusion**

We set out to understand how the practice of “visiting a park,” as involving other practices and related activities, meets one or several needs, which can be planned for and protected in a given society—thus demonstrating how and in what way parks are satisfiers toward meeting Protected Needs within consumption corridors. Problematizing the modes of spatial and park planning enables us to acknowledge that parks are not always inclusive spaces, as a vast body of literature on green gentrification also demonstrates (see Anguelovski et al. 2019 for a recent discussion), and that need satisfaction is not always ensured for diverse peoples. However, a focus on need satisfaction could enable a different way of planning parks that goes beyond the reproduction of social inequities. We highlight here three main considerations.
First, in conceptualizing practices in relation to meeting needs, we found that needs are always satisfied by practices and their different elements, which are enacted when that practice is performed. Or to put it differently, “embodied, materially mediated arrays, and shared meanings” (Schatzki 2001) are necessary to satisfy Protected Needs (see Figure 1). This has methodological as well as more practical implications. By studying the different activities associated with “visiting a park,” material arrangements, social norms and regulations, and skills and competencies can be uncovered, which in turn enable need satisfaction as a normative goal. We concur that “sustainable wellbeing” must grapple with the specificities of how diverse people carry out everyday life activities in different settings, which involves “focusing on the social, physical, technical and natural contexts in which both consumption and wellbeing are created” (Guillen-Royo and Wilhite 2015, 310).

In doing so, it is important to go beyond representations of how people understand Protected Needs. Through an approach that engages a diverse set of park users, we found that people can indeed declare that visiting the park is one way that needs are being met, but uncovering how and in what way practices play out through discussions and observations is essential. This is all the more relevant in settings where people are not used to identifying needs, or distinguishing needs from desires. In addition to understanding how activities in the park play out, we can also uncover goals (and emotional engagement around goals), such as wanting to achieve peace of mind, demonstrating the value of teleoaffective structures in relation to need satisfaction.

Second, a focus on Protected Needs decenters the idea that parks are primarily places for recreation or exercise, usually pursuits of the elite and middle classes in Indian cities, and demonstrates how they satisfy multiple needs. Needs can be satisfied for a diverse group of people and through a variety of activities in green public spaces, rather than being limited to the need satisfaction for some people and for some purposes, or the privileged few. This finding counters the dominant notion that urban greening projects primarily benefit urban elites, arguing instead that accessible green spaces provide the urban poor with irreplaceable spaces for privacy, recreation, relaxation, and livelihood. If this is indeed the case, then creating green spaces by displacing informal settlements, as discussed earlier, is both perverse and counterproductive. Rather, the focus should be on creating publicly accessible and well-maintained green spaces nearby and alongside informal settlements and lower-income neighborhoods. As our study suggests, parks are unique and synergistic need satisfiers for these social groups, who may not benefit from access to commercial spaces or green private spaces; this unequal access to green spaces was rendered all the more visible as a result of the social distancing measures and closing-off of public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, identifying the material arrangements, social norms, and competencies that combine to satisfy needs via the performance of practices helps us understand which particular “element of practice” enables or inhibits need satisfaction for different groups. Our interviews with environmental organizations, governmental officials, and urban planners in Chennai suggest that, currently, park planners and developers tend to privilege aesthetics elements and walking paths at the expense of open spaces for groups to gather, or seating for the elderly. This is primarily because elite recreational park users are most able to influence park design and urban planning processes, and their needs are thus prioritized in the design of these spaces; from a procedural justice standpoint, the lack of possibilities for other groups to influence planners results in the interests of elite groups being privileged over theirs. Studies such as this one, that examine park practices and need satisfaction among diverse groups, and in relation to specific material arrangements, can inform park redesign by enabling a focus on hitherto unrecognized uses and benefits. It also points to the importance of maintaining park amenities and infrastructures across the city, as has been demonstrated in other Asian cities (see Wu and Song 2017 for the case of Taiwan).

In relating the park back to the notion of consumption corridors and in understanding “visiting the park” as a consumption practice, we suggest that “space” and how it is “practiced” can and should be subject to a corridor. Because green public spaces are a limited resource in the cities of South and Southeast Asia, spatial planning must ensure that at least the minima in terms of space allocated to parks is achieved. The lower limit could involve setting a requirement for green space coverage in cities, as is already the case in Chennai (whether cities meet this target is another issue), but also the accessibility of green public spaces (for example, distance to parks) for diverse groups of people, and material arrangements available in parks for facilitating different types of activities. As illustrated in Figure 3, we suggest that spatial planning in relation to consumption corridors requires the maximization of aggregated need satisfaction, for most people, while minimizing need destruction in the interests of an elite few.
However, green public spaces from a consumption-corridors perspective cannot solely account for access to inclusive spaces. The resources necessary for maintaining such spaces must be considered, so as to allow for a diversity of practices to be carried out over time. These can include water and energy for irrigation, toilet services, fountains, or lighting, as well as maintenance services for benches, pathways, or shading, to name but a few. Understanding how and for whom these spaces are used is thus critical in determining how a corridor comes to be established, but also what is needed to insure its availability as a prerequisite for need satisfaction over the long term.

The consumption-corridor concept assumes participatory forms of engagement toward the establishment of maxima and minima, yet our study reveals the potentially contentious politics of planning for corridors in relation to urban development. The quantity and quality of urban space devoted to the commons, and the material arrangements and regulations governing these commons, are produced via political processes that replicate inequities. Building on emerging, participatory research on "sustainable consumption" that relates human needs to satisfiers (Guillen-Royo 2010), further efforts to engage diverse groups of people in discussing need satisfaction could help render visible the socio-spatial dynamics that lead to some needs being privileged over others. The feasibility of adopting a "consumption-corridors" approach for an equitable distribution of the consumption of space, within environmental and spatial resource limitations, suggests that a place-based, practice perspective could also inform the ways in which diverse groups are engaged in defining how and in what way parks are important to them. In other words, an approach based on meeting needs through social practices can empower people to provide significant input into urban planning measures, ensuring a form of procedural justice in designing corridors.

An upper limit to green public spaces in Chennai has yet to be achieved; even lower limits to accessing green public spaces as a synergistic satisfier are lacking, and this is precisely part of the problem. Priority is too often given to the voices of a powerful few, or favoring commercial interests that understand people primarily in their role as consumers, thus privileging shopping malls over parks. A needs-based approach in relation to consumption corridors allows us to render more complex the importance of green public spaces as a common good in a situation of limited resources, such as space. By engaging everyday park users in relating park practices to needs, we open up the opportunity for citizens to deliberate on how and in what way multiple needs can be planned for and protected in a given society—toward living in a corridor of green public space, and sustainable wellbeing for all.

**Note**

1. We define “green public spaces” as spaces that offer some degree of biodiversity, however limited; and are publicly accessible, whether under public or private ownership. We are aware of critical commentators who have identified “public space” as a western notion and explicitly bourgeois (Baviskar 2003, Arabindoo 2010). Nevertheless, we continue to use the term to denote open access to parks, while remaining cognizant of the ways in which the creation of public spaces in the post-colonial context are often about the creation of appropriate urban subjects through discipline and control (Chakrabarty 1991).

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Appendix 1

Annex 1. List of nine protected needs provided in English and used in the green public spaces project

The list of Protected Needs is authored by Antonietta Di Giulio and Rico Defila (see Di Giulio and Defila 2020).

| Group 1, focusing upon tangibles, material things (Protected Needs 1–3) | Specified description: The possibilities an individual should have |
|---|---|
| Need (what individuals must be allowed to want) | Description (summarized version for the interviews): You should have the possibility to …: Feed yourself sufficiently and with a variety of foods which are not detrimental to health. Live in a suitable accommodation. Care for your body with dignity and dress suitably. |
| (1) To be provided with the material necessities for life | Comprehensive description: |
| | to feed themselves sufficiently, with variety, and with food that is not detrimental to health. |
| | to live in a suitably protected and equipped accommodation, offering privacy and sufficient space and allowing them to realize their idea of living. |
| | to care for their bodies with dignity and dress suitably. |
| (2) To realize their own conception of daily life | Description (summarized version for the interviews): You should have the possibility to …: Shape your daily life according to your own ideas. Procure and use the material necessities for life from a diverse range of supply and have sufficient means to do so. Move freely in public space. |
| | Comprehensive description: |
| | to shape their daily life according to their own ideas. |
| | to procure and use the material necessities for life from a diverse range of supply, and to have sufficient means to do so. |
| | to move freely in public space. |
| (3) To live in a livable environment | Description (summarized version for the interviews): You should have the possibility to …: Live in an environment that is not harmful to health and is pleasing to the eye. Develop a relationship with nature. Have access to and move about in diverse landscapes. |
| | Comprehensive description: |
| | to live in an environment (built and natural) that is not harmful to health and is esthetically pleasing. |
| | to develop a sensorial and emotional relationship with nature. |

(continued)
to have access to and be able to move about in diverse natural and cultural landscapes.

**Group 2, focusing upon the person (Protected Needs 4–6)**

**Need (what individuals must be allowed to want)**

(4) To develop as a person

**Specified description:** The possibilities an individual should have

**Description (summarized version for the interviews):** You should have the possibility to: Develop your potential and individual identity. Face the challenges of your own choice. Freely access reliable information and thus form your own opinion.

**Comprehensive description:**

to develop their potential (knowledge, skills, attitudes, feelings, etc.) and thus their individual identity.
to face the challenges of their choice.
to freely access reliable information and thus form their own opinion.

(5) To make their own life choices

**Specified description:** The possibilities an individual should have

**Description (summarized version for the interviews):** You should have the possibility to: Freely decide and act upon the values, beliefs, spirituality, religiosity, ideology etc. you choose to adopt or reject. Set your own life goals and pursue them. Determine how you want to lead your life.

**Comprehensive description:**
to freely decide and act upon the value-orientations they choose to adopt or reject (spirituality, religiosity, ideology, etc.).
to set their own life goals and pursue them.
to determine how they want to lead their life in terms of intimate relationships, family planning, where to live, etc.

(6) To perform activities valuable to them

**Specified description:** The possibilities an individual should have

**Description (summarized version for the interviews):** You should have the possibility to: Carry out activities you consider to be fulfilling and activities through which you can unfold your potential. Allocate your time for your activities according to your own preferences. Have time for idleness.

**Comprehensive description:**
to carry out activities that they consider to be fulfilling (in work and leisure; paid and unpaid).
to carry out activities that match their personality and in which they can unfold their potential (in work and leisure; paid and unpaid).
to allocate their time for their different activities according to their own preferences and to have time for idleness.

**Group 3, focusing upon community (Protected Needs 7–9)**

**Need (what individuals must be allowed to want)**

(7) To be part of a community

**Specified description:** The possibilities an individual should have

**Description (summarized version for the interviews):** You should have the possibility to: Maintain social relationships with other people. Take part in cultural activities and celebrations, and participate in associations. Access the cultural and historical heritage of your community.

**Comprehensive description:**
to maintain social relationships with other people (private, professional, during training, etc.).
to take part in cultural activities and celebrations and to participate in associations.
to access the cultural and historical heritage of their community.

(8) To have a say in the shaping of society

**Specified description:** The possibilities an individual should have

**Description (summarized version for the interviews):** You should have the possibility to: Co-determine the affairs of the society in which you are living. Take an active stand for concerns and problems (local, national, international) that you care about. Voice your opinion, by yourself and with others.

**Comprehensive description:**
to co-determine the affairs of the society in which they live.
to take an active stand for concerns and problems (local, national, international) they hold dear.
to voice their opinion, by themselves and with others.

(9) To be granted protection by society

**Specified description:** The possibilities an individual should have

**Description (summarized version for the interviews):** You should have the possibility to: Be protected from violence and from natural hazards. Pursue your goals without discrimination. Live in legal certainty and be treated with dignity and respect. Be supported in the event of impairment.

**Comprehensive description:**
to be protected from public and private violence, from infringements on physical and mental integrity, and from natural hazards.
to pursue their goals without discrimination and with equal opportunity, to live in legal certainty, and to be treated with dignity and respect.
to be supported in the event of physical or mental impairment, unemployment, poverty, and other impairing conditions.