

## ESSAY

Vital Topics Forum: Modalities of Planetary Health and Justice

## Plastics, children, and health—Who cares?

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## Funding information

David Sengstack and the Marsh-Gillette Fellowships for Childhood Studies

## INTRODUCTION

Describing their experience of the 2015 and 2016 floods in northeastern Tamil Nadu, Priya (sixth grade) said “When the water started entering the house, it was twigs and leaves. As it started rising, it pulled along so much plastic and things stuck to it. It took days to clean all the plastic out when we went to the house again.” I listened as we sat on the cement floor of the craft room of a peri-urban school in the region in 2019. We were sitting in two circles, learning to braid wires into bags. The strands made of sturdy nylon were just “wires” that the girls had witnessed their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers braid into grocery bags for sale, gifts, and family use. I did the braids well, the girls said. I smiled and, encouraged, pursued more questions about their opinions of plastics in their everyday environment.

The conversation was one of many that I had with schoolchildren during my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu in 2019–2020. This was focused on two cleanliness campaigns—a “plastic ban” emphasizing environmental and ecological health and a contagion-prevention campaign promoting hand-washing and other individualized preventative measures for human health. The two campaigns shared a discourse of sanitation to secure the health of future generations, echoing a colonial and caste modality of intimate governance through children. Centering on children as their protagonists—agents, conduits, and beneficiaries—the campaigns evoked parallel discourses of care for human and planetary health as their goals. However, in their everyday lives, schoolchildren had to negotiate the interdiscursive gaps (Silverstein, 2005) between the two campaigns and their actionables through the material modality of plastic.

Plastic, while a threat within the environmental campaigns, acts as a protective shield against contagious diseases. In this essay, I outline some of the questions that children’s lifeworlds raised about conflicting material discourses of care work in efforts to secure human and planetary health, dimensions that are portrayed as aligned within environmental discourses relating to childhood.

## A PLASTIC BAN

Plastic takes many forms in Tamil Nadu, India—from commodities of everyday use and idols of Gods, to medical equipment and food packaging where the signification of its use value subsumes and takes precedence over its material composition (Dey & Michael, 2021; Pathak, 2020). However, one discourse that marks the material modality as “plastic” is that of waste and pollution (Nagy, 2021) alongside concerns about toxicity (Pathak, 2020). Litter and garbage in public spaces such as roads, bodies of water, and schoolyards draw attention to plastic’s longevity and the obstacles it poses to human, animal, and ecological health. Governmental and nongovernmental campaigns in Tamil Nadu draw public attention to this issue through temporal discourses of securing planetary health for future generations by returning to pre-plastic materialities in everyday life.

Beginning January 1, 2019, the Tamil Nadu state government implemented a ban on some nonmedical single-use disposable plastics such as plastic bags, cups, straws, and water sachets. More commonly, this ban has been referred to as the “plastic ban” or the “say no to plastic” campaign among the communities in the urban periphery. The ban and its canvassing were enacted under the Government of India’s Environment Protection

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Act, 1986 (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2021). This campaign framed school children as the ambassadors of the message, and many school administrators participated in this campaign. Images of children in school uniforms were extensively used by media channels across the political landscape to hint that banning plastics and environmental cleanliness were essential to assuring the nation's collective future health.

## CHILDHOOD AND PLASTIC—PERFORMING CARE

This environmental campaign's<sup>1</sup> discursive coupling of childhood and plastics produces an affective rhetoric of the future to evoke the seriousness and urgency of the problem (Krafft, 2020). The potency of this coupling comes from its material-temporal dimension. Plastics, in their malleability, enter several dimensions of the community's and the school's everyday functioning. However, their impediment to the flow of water and life could mean that the current generation of adults would leave the planet uninhabitable for future generations. Implying that this amounts to a betrayal of the care responsibility vested in adults and humans more broadly, these discourses call on the public, young and old, to act with responsibility and care.

The use of children as protagonists in efforts to raise awareness about the impact of plastics on the environment and human bodies carries echoes of older and continuing colonial and caste discourses in the region around sanitation and hygiene to prevent communicable diseases. Colonial and postcolonial developmental public education in lieu of systemic interventions have elicited strong critiques about the futility, limitation, and even the violence of pedagogy in the face of infrastructural limitations, structural inequities, and exploitative land relations underlying current systems of sanitation (Desai et al., 2015; Harrison, 1994; Liboiron, 2021; McCarthy, 2015). Such hygiene and sanitation pedagogy serves to perform and reinforce the othering of marginalized populations through the discourse of cleanliness. The discursive continuity between the sanitation and plastic ban campaigns allows the paternalistic project to nominally ignore the persistent tensions between the two (Pathak, 2022) and present them as parallel concerns for the children's well-being. Aligning plastic littering prevention or careful waste segregation with brushing one's teeth, hand-washing, and washing ones' clothes discursively places the acts within a moral economy of care and responsibility that children inhabit through their communities and are expected to imbibe in the school.

In describing the plastic ban, the chief minister, journalists, TV anchors, and textbooks used the term *sugaadhaaram* (sanitation). The word *sugaadhaaram* is a composite of the words *sugam*, meaning "comfort or well-being" and *aadhaaram* (foundation)—the foundation for well-being. *Sugaadhaaram* and its earlier variant, *sugavazhi*, have historically been used to refer to sanitation and were entextualized in public pedagogies of health, attention to contagion, and care against a fatalist mindset.<sup>2</sup> Another term used in both campaigns was *suttham* (clean/cleanliness) as in "Suttham soru podum" (cleanliness feeds rice/meal)—a popular didactic proverb in Tamil. *Suttham* and *sugaadhaaram* are frequently used together to evoke, through a metonymy of food and comfort, an essential understanding of health, hygiene, and sanitation as care.

After hearing about my research topic, ninth-grader Ramesh quipped "Akka, suttham soru podum naa, sugaadhaaram kolambu oothumaa?" (Akka, if cleanliness will serve rice, will *sugaadhaaram* serve the *kolambu*?<sup>3</sup>). In posing this question, Ramesh evoked a popular didactic maxim about cleanliness that featured in genres of cleanliness discourses such as text book lessons, performance and writing competitions, and teachers' instructions apart from such humorous uptakes. Another student, Vijay remarked that the *kolambu* will come floating in a plastic bag. Students frequently put a humorous twist on the popular Tamil maxim, "*Suttham soru podum*" (lit., cleanliness will serve rice/food), meaning that cleanliness and hygiene can be lifesaving and livelihood-protecting. The latter half of the maxim, "*soru podum*" (will feed), is also linked to notions of kinship. The local culinary routine of serving and consuming rice with *kolambu* was a care routine that the children repeated daily in their homes and during midday meals at school, both as recipients and towards others. The gastronomic metonymy of cleanliness played into a relational idea of care that children engaged in not only through institutionally codified responsibilities but also through the everyday tasks of the household and community that they enact (Balagopalan, 2021).

## HUMAN AND PLANETARY HEALTH—CONNECTIONS AND A GAP

Reminding the children of their duty to care for the environment as one would care for one's mother<sup>4</sup> (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2021), the plastic ban campaign echoed the vocabulary used in a long history of campaigns, projects, and pedagogies of personal hygiene for disease prevention and sanitary care. The term *sugaadhaaram* evokes a discursive scalar connection of care between planetary—of mother earth and one's environment—and individual—of one's own body and house. What this discursive connection misses, however, is the role plastics play in fighting contagion, one which places planetary and individual health at odds with each other. This tension was made apparent during the pandemic with the widespread enforcement of disposable masks, and gloves, including during very brief stints of school reopenings (Ravichandran, 2020). The interdiscursive tension and frustration, though, was not new to the children.

Right outside the school, an open food cart, *thaatha kadai* (grandfather's shop), catered primarily to the school students who stepped out of their campus. In this cart, the vendor arranged a row of plastic wrapped snacks and juices in transparent polyethylene terephthalate (PET) boxes around the cart and kept a few bags closer to himself. These few bags held fresh fruit slices, spices to sprinkle on them, and a jug of lime juice. While the fresh

options were cheaper than the packaged goods, very few opted for them. Mani, an eighth-grade student explained, “It is okay to buy from *thaatha kadai* because it is all wrapped and sealed.” Single-use plastic wrap and bags played a critical role in preventing the spread of contagious diseases through food. They allowed shops like *thaatha kadai* to offer hygienic and individualized transportation and sale of food to those without or with limited access to water, soap, or sterile reusable food containers. Children such as Mani who traveled in public buses and walked on busy or dusty roads could carry and eat packaged food without fear of contamination. Sealed plastic wrappers gave them, as consumers, a simple go-to rule for perceiving a variety of foods as safe. The material also carried over to other realms of their lives.

These interdiscursive tensions manifest in the lives of people who do not use single-use plastics only once either out of choice or out of necessity (Dey & Michael, 2021). Children used the supposedly single-use plastic covers over and over as rain caps, bookbag covers, lunch bags, sanitary napkin carriers, and so forth, until the bags disintegrated, broke, or mixed with decomposable waste such that it is difficult to wash, dry, and segregate. Some children also narrated ways in which plastic flex banners from movie theaters and political parties turn up to rainproof the roofs of their homes. The tension further amplifies in the everyday material relations of people who are surrounded by municipal waste, where certain forms of clean plastic afford protection, comfort, or dignity (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018).

Plastic, as a material modality, blurs the boundaries between individual human and planetary health while acting as the material boundary between bodies and their “other” (Pathak, 2020). Despite the widely known and taught research on their negative impact on endocrine systems and other forms of toxicity, single-use disposable plastics remain aspirational and a source of convenience for the children—as they are also for many communities in the Global South (Dey & Michael, 2021). Further, the almost-infinite malleability of plastics to blend into the children’s daily material fabric also made their ban difficult to implement. These bans nevertheless were uttered as instructions, lessons, posters, art competitions, and rallies by the schools and the children as a performance of care (Black, 2018). Children experience and participate in such action with the ethical/moral impetus to cleanliness.

Children’s roles in both public and environmental health campaigns blur distinctions between the caregiver and the cared-for. Youth are at once recipients of lessons about care and health and conduits through which their communities receive this knowledge. Further, highlighted as “the future generation,” children are framed as the reason why communities and the state should provide the care necessary to assure healthy bodies and a healthy ecological setup. Children’s performances of environmental “lament” through poems, talks, exhibitions, and skits that highlight current lapses in care of human and environmental health, then, function simultaneously as a call to care and a form of care in itself (Black, 2018).

Care within environmental campaigns goes beyond complicating the distinction between experience and agency/action (Black, 2018). Coopted within the campaign discourses through school competitions and performances, children display everyday relational negotiations of care for the self, other humans, and their environment as intrinsically interconnected with inevitable tensions. Coding and distinguishing everyday objects of use from plastic waste in their conversations with me, the children demonstrated the ongoing work, tensions, and complexities in the human relationship with the material modality of plastic as well as the environment. What, then, is “plastic?” Who bears the costs of knowing, distinguishing, and foregoing plastics? For whom then, is a ban on plastics a form of justice? Who shall enact it? The schoolchildren are called on to care for themselves, their kin, and the planet through and against plastics all at once. Their humor, lament, and negotiation with the material discourses of plastic lay bare the problems and frustrations with placing the onus of planetary well-being on individuals and communities who are along the consumption and reuse chain while obfuscating the historical and global processes and structures (political and economic) that set environmental problems in motion in the first place.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Sarada Balagopalan, Kate Cairns, Sneha Krishnan, Meredith Bak, and Kate Riley for their thoughtful feedback and encouragement. The travel for this research was supported by the David Sengstack and the Marsh-Gillette Fellowships for Childhood Studies at Rutgers University-Camden.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I refer to cleanliness campaigns as a genre (Briggs & Bauman, 1992)—composed of policy documents, speeches, textbook lessons and mediatization, TV ads, roadside banners that leak into other realms like marketing campaigns and political campaigns.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison (1994) discusses the colonial government’s adoption of *The Way to Health*, a sanitary primer for school curriculum, entitled *Sugavazhi* (1901) in Tamil and published by The Christian Literary Society India, Madras.

<sup>3</sup> A curry-like sauce often made of tamarind, spices, lentils, and vegetables for everyday meals.

<sup>4</sup> The framing of environment as one’s mother echoes a longer regional tradition of engaging with the earth as a mother to all living beings.

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**How to cite this article:** Kannan, Smruthi Bala. 2024. "Plastics, children, and health—Who cares?" *American Anthropologist* 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.28011>