



Faculty of Design

2022

The Tower of Consumerism in India: Consumerism and its impact on socioeconomic growth and environmental sustainability in India

Singh, Amandeep, Nath, Gagarina, Kaur, Komal, Landge, Mohnish, Urade, Oshal and Arya, Sachin

Suggested citation:

Singh, Amandeep, Nath, Gagarina, Kaur, Komal, Landge, Mohnish, Urade, Oshal and Arya, Sachin (2022) The Tower of Consumerism in India: Consumerism and its impact on socioeconomic growth and environmental sustainability in India. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design, RSD11, 3-16 Oct 2022, Brighton, United Kingdom. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4332/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.



**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
(RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023**

The Tower of Consumerism in India

Amandeep Singh, Gagarina Nath, Komal Kaur, Mohnish Landge, Oshal Urade, and Sachin Arya

Consumerism and its impact on socioeconomic growth and environmental sustainability in India

India's pursuit of economic growth to improve citizens' quality of life presents a challenge in balancing development with environmental sustainability.

Navigating the socio-cultural and economic complexities and India's performance in the Environmental Performance Index requires finding a sustainable equilibrium. However, the allure of consumerism as a quick-fix solution to generate jobs and improve financial conditions can perpetuate inequality and lead to environmental degradation.

This research paper explores consumerism in India using systemic design. Our comprehensive gigamap visually represents the complex dynamics at play. The gigamap features a tower-like illustration depicting consumerism, with sections reflecting society's socioeconomic hierarchy and power dynamics. This visual context offers valuable insights into the challenges of achieving a sustainable balance between economic growth and environmental well-being.

The gigamap incorporates leverage points identified through causal maps and system synthesis maps. These leverage points represent critical intervention areas with significant potential for impact. By mapping out actors and barriers within the gigamap, we gain insights into complexities and potential solutions for promoting sustainability.

To enhance our understanding, we integrate Kate Raworth's Doughnut Model of Economics, developed at the University of Oxford. This holistic economic model considers the ecological ceiling and social foundation necessary for human well-being. By integrating the Doughnut Model into our gigamap, we propose a comprehensive framework for achieving sustainable development in India.

Our research aims to provide policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders with a holistic understanding of the consumerism system in India and the challenges it poses to socioeconomic growth and environmental sustainability. The gigamap serves as a powerful visual tool, guiding discussions and interventions and enabling the design of effective strategies for a more sustainable and equitable future in India.

KEYWORDS: consumerism, socioeconomic growth, environmental sustainability, systemic design, gigamap, economic hierarchy, leverage points, doughnut model of economics, India

RSD TOPICS: Socioecological Design, Economics & Organizations, Society & Culture

Introduction

Consumerism, characterised by the excessive acquisition and consumption of goods and services, has become a pervasive global phenomenon in recent decades. Its impact on economic growth and environmental sustainability has garnered significant attention, particularly in developing countries like India, where rapid economic expansion and population growth have intensified consumption patterns.

Understanding the complex relationship between consumerism, economic growth, and environmental sustainability is crucial for designing effective policies and interventions that promote a balance between economic progress and ecological preservation. This study aims to delve into the intricate dynamics of consumerism in India, exploring its implications for both economic growth and environmental sustainability. By adopting a systemic perspective and leveraging systems thinking and design approaches, this research seeks to identify the interdependencies, feedback loops, and potential leverage points within the system, offering insights for developing sustainable

consumption patterns that foster both economic prosperity and environmental well-being.

Literature Review

To understand the complex relationship between the environment and economics, we explored the following literature.

In India, consumerism has grown rapidly due to factors like the expanding middle class, urbanisation, and globalisation. Works by P. Modak and T. Jackson shed light on this growth. Debates have emerged regarding the sustainability of consumer-led development, considering issues like income inequality, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. Environmental challenges related to consumerism include energy consumption, waste generation, and climate change impacts.

To analyse this system, we referred to "Design Journeys through Complex Systems Practice Tools for Systemic Design" by Peter Jones and Kristel van Ael. They provided frameworks for understanding the interactions within the consumerism-economic growth-environmental sustainability system.

Applying systems thinking, scholars have used frameworks such as Donella Meadows' "Twelve Leverage Points to Intervene in a System," Kate Raworth's "Doughnut Model," and Prasad Modak's "12 R's for Circular Economy" to identify intervention points and policy changes. Previous research has also explored policy initiatives addressing consumerism-related challenges and promoting sustainable consumption.

By combining theoretical frameworks and real-world examples, we aim to develop strategies for harmonious coexistence between economic progress and environmental preservation.

Methodology

The research methodology employed a multi-faceted approach to investigate the dynamics of consumerism, economic growth, and environmental sustainability in India. It involved a comprehensive literature review, actor mapping, a causal map, and a timeline to understand the interconnectedness of factors and trace the growth of consumerism. These elements were integrated into a system map incorporating various

archetypes and feedback loops. Leveraging systems thinking, potential leverage points were identified to guide interventions and policy changes. To enhance understanding, an illustrative approach was adopted using a building as a metaphor for the tower of consumerism, depicting societal strata and income inequality. This visualisation effectively conveyed the impacts of consumerism on different segments of society, highlighting the disparities and challenges associated with prevailing consumption patterns.

Research Insights

- Economic liberalisation in the 1990s sparked consumerism in India, attracting foreign investment and stimulating demand for a wide range of consumer goods.
- The Indian middle class plays a significant role in the economy, contributing to income, spending, and savings, driving economic growth.
- Increasing disposable income among Indian middle-class families is reshaping consumption patterns, with a focus on luxury goods and experiential purchases.
- GDP fails to consider crucial factors for measuring economic advancement, such as income equality, ecological sustainability, and standard of living.
- Socioeconomic disparities exacerbate vulnerability to environmental degradation, particularly among marginalised groups who have limited access to resources and bear a greater burden of environmental hazards.
- Industry growth often leads to exploitation within supply chains, with unsustainable practices and human rights violations occurring as a result.

System Analysis

The system map of consumerism highlights the interconnectedness of factors, starting with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the conversion of needs into desires through marketing and socio-economic hierarchies. This drives individuals into a hedonic loop focused on material possessions, fueling consumerism within the system of capitalism and economic growth. However, this growth comes at the cost of exploitation and environmental degradation, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities who lack opportunities and suffer from limited access to infrastructure. This perpetuates a vicious cycle, widening the socio-economic hierarchy and pushing more people into the

hedonic loop. The system map underscores the need for interventions and policies that address inequality, exploitation, and environmental degradation while promoting sustainable consumption and equitable societal outcomes.

Findings

Our analysis of the system map revealed that the consumerism system is influenced by various leverage points, as outlined by Donella Meadows' 12 leverage point principles. The findings emphasised the importance of incorporating these leverage points to drive transformative change towards sustainability.

The identified leverage points include constants, parameters, and numbers such as subsidies, taxes, and standards (Leverage Point 9). By strategically adjusting these factors, we can incentivise sustainable practices and discourage harmful environmentally-related behaviours. Regulating negative feedback loops (Leverage Point 8) is crucial to prevent the system from spiralling into destructive patterns while driving positive feedback loops (Leverage Point 7), which can amplify sustainable practices and behaviours.

Material flows and nodes of material intersection (Leverage Point 6) play a significant role in shaping the system's environmental impact. By optimising resource utilisation and minimising waste, we can promote sustainable material flows. Information flows (Leverage Point 5) are essential for fostering awareness, education, and knowledge sharing, enabling individuals to make informed choices.

Addressing the rules of the system (Leverage Point 4), including incentives, punishments, and constraints, can shape behaviours and steer the system towards sustainability. The distribution of power over the rules (Leverage Point 3) influences decision-making and governance structures, requiring equitable and participatory approaches. Aligning the goals of the system (Leverage Point 2) with sustainability objectives is crucial to drive concerted action.

Ultimately, to effect lasting change, we must challenge the mindset or paradigm (Leverage Point 1) that underlies the system. By shifting societal values and perceptions towards pro-environmental and pro-social values, we can transform the consumerism system at its core.

By integrating these leverage points into our framework and solutions, we can catalyse systemic change, foster sustainability, and create a more resilient and equitable future.

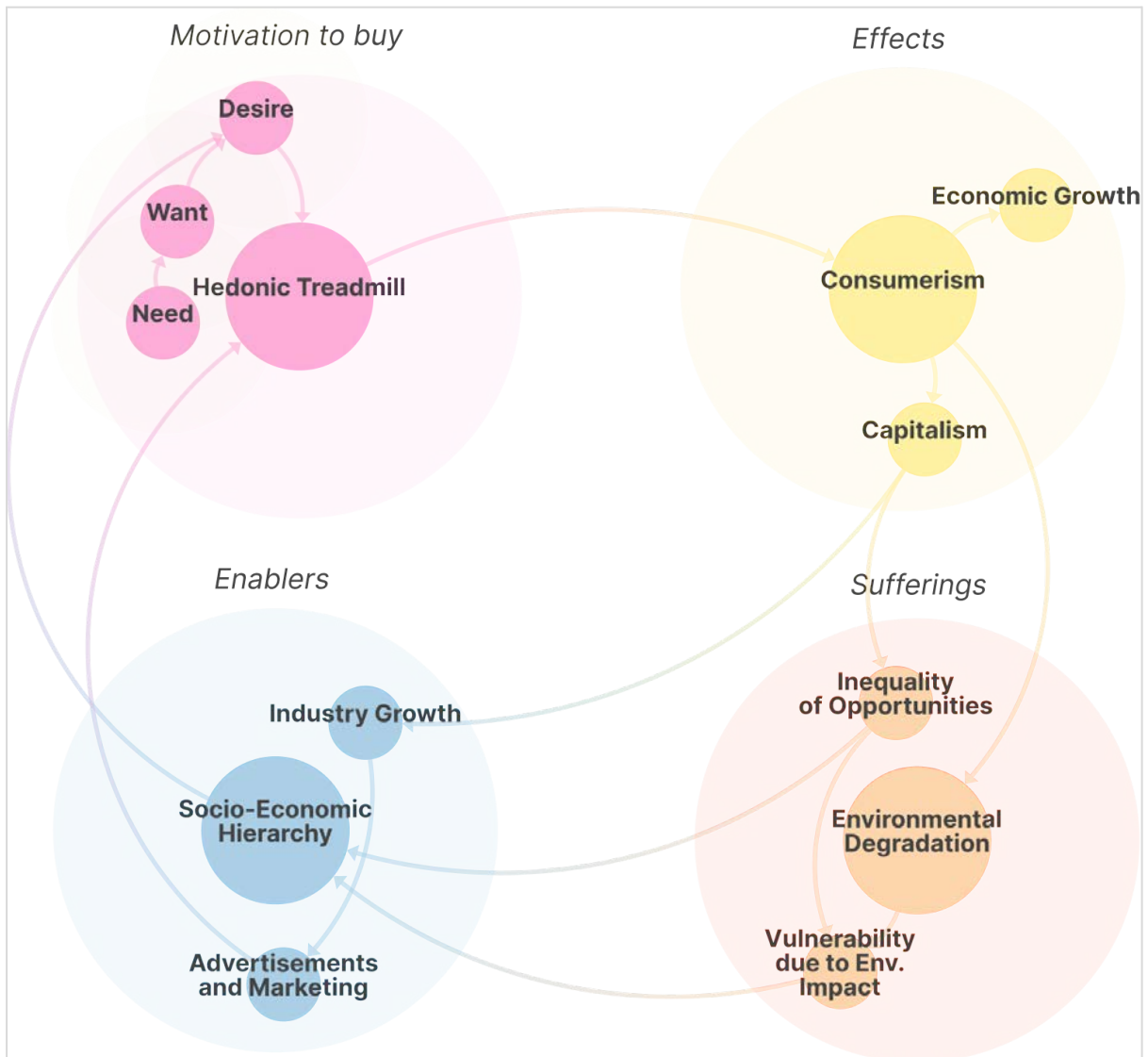
Additionally, we developed a framework within the system map that outlined the barriers faced by each stakeholder, hindering their role as an agent of change towards sustainability. By placing oneself within this framework, individuals can identify the specific barriers they need to overcome to become active participants in the transition towards a more sustainable system.

Conclusion

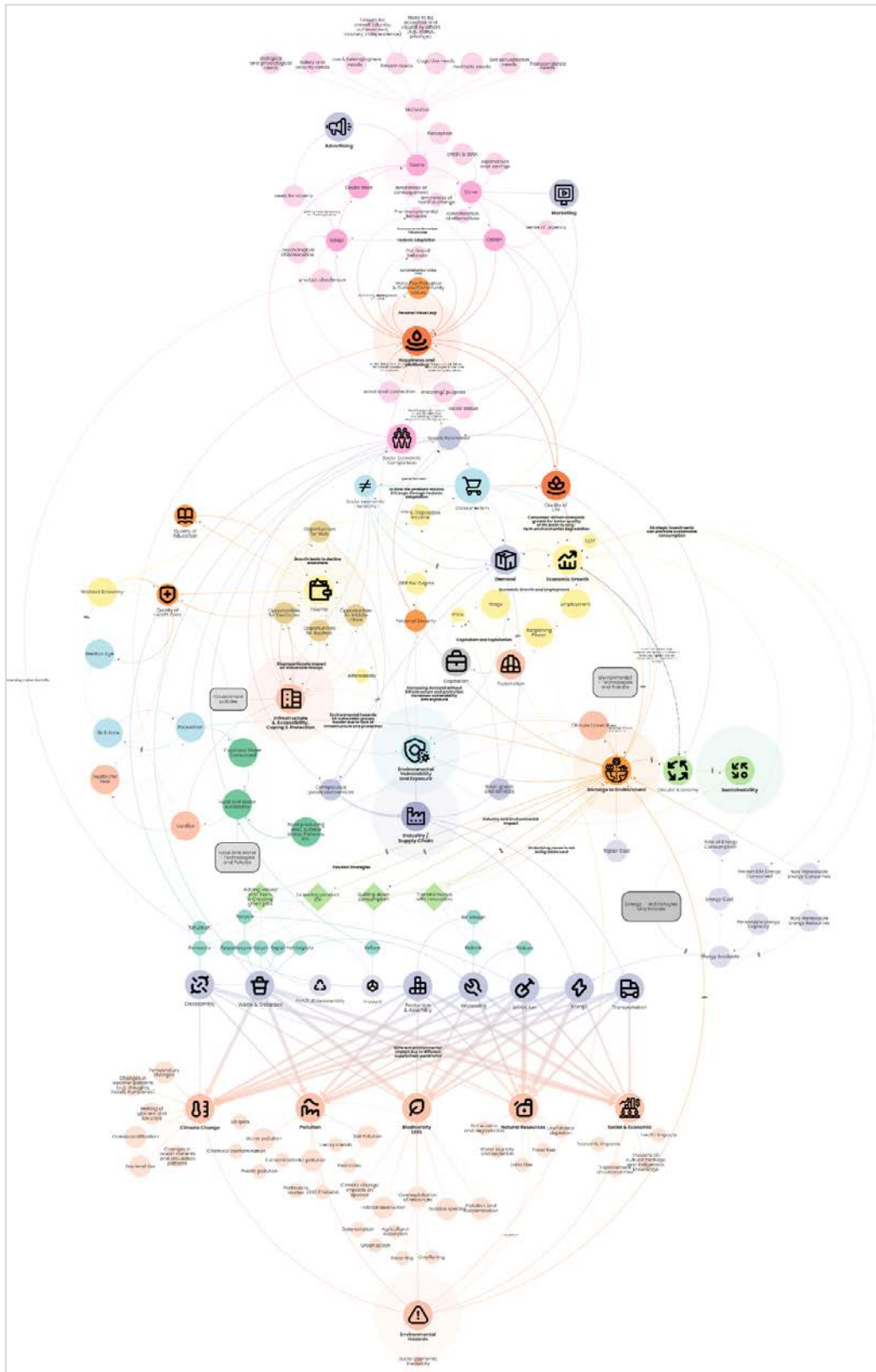
In conclusion, this research paper has explored the intricate dynamics of consumerism in India and its implications for socio-economic growth and environmental sustainability. By adopting a systemic perspective and leveraging systems thinking and design approaches, we have identified the interdependencies, feedback loops, and potential leverage points within the consumerism system. Our analysis emphasises the need for transformative change to promote sustainable consumption patterns that foster both economic prosperity and environmental well-being.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Kate Raworth's "Doughnut Model" is significant for scoping the solutions within our systemic design inquiry. The Doughnut Model provides a framework for understanding the boundaries of human well-being and ecological limits. It helps identify the space where socioeconomic development can thrive without surpassing environmental thresholds. By applying this model, we can ensure that our proposed interventions and policy changes not only address the challenges of consumerism but also align with the broader goal of achieving sustainable development within the safe operating space of the planet.

By integrating the identified leverage points and the insights from the Doughnut Model, we can develop strategies that tackle the root causes of consumerism while promoting equitable socio-economic growth and environmental preservation in India. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on systemic approaches to sustainability and provides a foundation for future studies and practical interventions in the field.



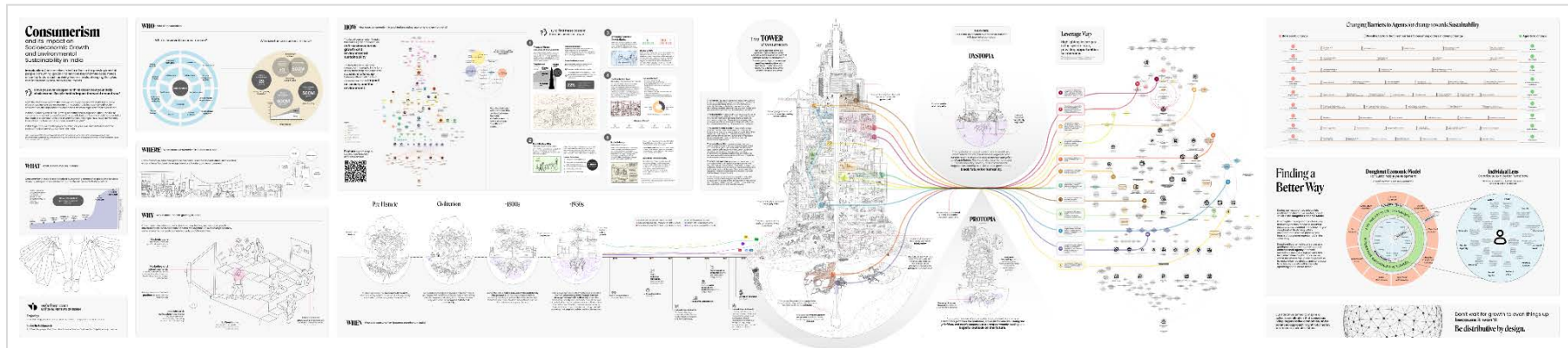
Detail: Systems synthesis map



Detail: Systems map

Gigamap

This gigamap was created as a distillation of the research insights.



Gigamap of Consumerism in India

Resources

1. Raworth, K. (2017). Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist. Chelsea Green Publishing.
2. Meadows, D. (1999). Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System. Donella Meadows Institute.
<https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>
3. Jackson, T. (1996). Material concerns: pollution, profit, and quality of life. Psychology Press.
4. Modak, P. (2018). Environmental management towards sustainability. CRC Press.
5. Graeff, T. R. (1997). Consumption situations and the effects of brand image on consumers' brand evaluations. *Psychology & Marketing*, 14(1), 49-70.
6. Hoch, S. J., & Lowenstein, G. F. (1991). Time-inconsistent preferences and consumer self-control. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17(4), 492-507.
7. India Today. (2005). Mad About Malls.
8. Fischer, J. M., & Ravizza, M. (1993). Introduction. In J. M. Fischer & M. Ravizza (Eds.), *Perspectives on moral responsibility* (pp. xiii-xvii). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
9. Garvey, J. (2008). *The ethics of climate change: Right and wrong in a warming world*. London: Continuum.
10. Goodin, R. E. (1986). Responsibilities. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 36, 50-56.
11. Green, M. (2005). Institutional responsibility for moral problems. In A. Kuper (Ed.), *Global responsibilities: Who must deliver on human rights?* New York: Routledge.
12. ICE360. (2022). *The Rise of India's Middle Class*. ICE360: People Research on India's Consumer Economy.
<https://www.ice360.in/app/uploads/2022/11/middle-class-brochure-2022.pdf>
13. Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (n.d.). *Circular Economy in India*. Retrieved from <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/circular-economy-in-india>
14. McKinsey Global Institute. (2010). *Urban Awakening in India*.
https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20functions/operations/our%20insights/urban%20awakening%20in%20india/mgi_indias_urban_awakening_full_report.pdf

15. World Economic Forum. (2019). Future of Consumption in Fast-Growth Consumer Markets: INDIA.
<https://www.weforum.org/reports/future-of-consumption-in-fast-growth-consumer-markets-india/>
16. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2007). Fourth assessment report climate change synthesis report. Retrieved from <http://www.ipcc.ch>
17. Nagaraj, A. (2019). India's 'invisible' home garment workers exploited by fashion brands. Reuters.
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-garments-women-idUSKCN1PQ483>
18. Swaran, V. (2022). Rich Millet Poor Millet: The Irony in Our Consumerism. The Bastion.
<https://thebastion.co.in/politics-and/environment/resource-management/rich-millet-poor-millet-the-irony-in-our-consumerism>

Authors

Amandeep Singh

Gagarina Nath,

Komal Kaur

Mohnish Landge

Oshal Urade

Sachin Arya

National Institute of Design, Bengaluru, India