

Cleanliness in 21st century Can Have Only Measure: Carbon

By **Acharya Prashant** - April 13, 2025



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Cleanliness has traditionally been tied to order and discipline, usually showing up in the most obvious ways: a tidy home, a spotless office, or a neatly kept public space. We've come to associate these things with civility and a sense of social responsibility. But what if we've been thinking about cleanliness in too limited a way? We generally tend to equate cleanliness with a physical appearance—something we can see and touch—but in doing so, we may be overlooking something much more fundamental.

People often ask, "Why do individuals from India seem more conscious about cleanliness when they live abroad?" The question is not about nationality; it's about the human

tendency to act based on environment rather than inner clarity. There is a tendency in all of us to change our behavior depending on the external conditions we face. The way we adhere to cleanliness standards, or fail to, is often a reflection of what we perceive as socially acceptable, not what we understand to be necessary.

When someone's conduct changes depending on where they are, it reveals that the change is not arising from inner understanding but from external compulsion. In India, one may litter without a second thought. The same person, while living abroad, may follow rules meticulously—not because of a deep sense of responsibility, but due to fear of penalties, surveillance, and social pressure. This kind of behavior is reactive, not conscious. And once the external pressure is lifted, the old patterns return. The issue, then, is not cultural or geographic—it is of the human mind.

Cleanliness and Economic Priorities

To understand cleanliness more deeply, one must consider economic context. When people are struggling to meet fundamental needs—food, shelter, safety—it's unreasonable to expect them to focus on public hygiene or aesthetics. Cleanliness is not a priority when survival is at stake. In a world where many are focused on securing their next meal or a safe place to sleep, the concept of environmental cleanliness becomes secondary.

There are very few wealthy nations that are visibly unclean, and very few poor nations that appear clean. This is not a coincidence—it is a reflection of priorities. When survival takes precedence, cleanliness becomes a luxury. Economic freedom grants people the space to think beyond immediate necessities. It allows for the mental and physical bandwidth to consider the health of the communities around them.

Even within India, affluent communities often maintain standards of cleanliness on par with the developed world. Therefore, the issue is circumstantial, not cultural. What drives development in one part of the world does not necessarily apply elsewhere. The roots of prosperity vary—from governance to history, from geography to geopolitics. Economic wealth allows for cleaner environments; poverty often makes it harder to prioritize anything beyond survival. To reduce the question of cleanliness to race or nationality is unjust. It dismisses the complex web of factors that contribute to a society's ability to maintain cleanliness. It ignores the deeper, more structural issues at play.

Disguised Violence in Modern Society

Visual tidiness is often mistaken for purity. A modern, state-of-the-art slaughterhouse may appear spotless—sterile floors, gleaming equipment, no blood in sight. And yet, the violence is undeniable. Contrast this with a modest hospital in rural India, where care and healing continue despite peeling paint and cracked tiles. Cleanliness, in this context, is not merely based on the absence of visible dirt but on the consequence of the action.

Cleanliness must be assessed not by what pleases the eye, but by what causes the least harm. An electric SUV may appear clean, even progressive. But if it is powered by fossil-fuel

electricity, transporting just one person while consuming disproportionate resources, can it still be called clean? On the other hand, a smoky old bus carrying eighty passengers might, on a per-person basis, contribute far less harm. Cleanliness is not about sparkle; it is about a holistic understanding of our impact on everybody and everything around us. The real cost of our actions must include their environmental, social and mental impacts.

Environmental Hypocrisy of the Developed World

When societies chase a superficial version of cleanliness—glossy towers, manicured neighborhoods, gleaming cars—while ignoring carbon footprints, water misuse, and exploitation of resources, they are participating in a deeper filth. Imagine a person bathing four times a day in a desert country with limited water, or picture a pristine lawn, its lush green grass nurtured with gallons of precious water while millions around the world struggle to find clean drinking water. That is not cleanliness. That is violence—against nature, against others, and ultimately, against the self. Every time we indulge in overconsumption or disregard sustainability for the sake of convenience or appearance, we contribute to a much deeper form of dirt. According to a report from the World Resources Institute (WRI), if every country consumed resources at the rate of the United States, the planet would require 5 Earths to sustain such lifestyles.

Beyond the Visible Sheen

It is time to reflect on what we mean by cleanliness. Is it simply the absence of visible dirt? Is a sparkling boulevard in a fuel-guzzling city cleaner than a dusty road in a carbon-neutral village? These questions push us to think about cleanliness in broader terms. It's not just about what's visible.

If a society consumes immense amounts of fossil fuel and leaves behind a towering carbon footprint, can it still claim to be clean? Here lies the contradiction: countries praised for cleanliness are often the ones contributing most to global environmental degradation. According to the Global Carbon Project, the United States, despite its high cleanliness standards, contributes nearly 15% of global carbon dioxide emissions, a significant environmental burden. Meanwhile, a humble village that appears disorderly may have a negligible ecological impact. Cleanliness, in this sense, should be judged not by the absence of dirt, but by the broader ecological and ethical footprint we leave behind. Which kind of filth is more dangerous—visible litter or invisible emissions? The visible litter may be unpleasant, but it is the invisible emissions that are slowly suffocating the planet. If only carbon dioxide had a color, it would be visible everywhere, reminding us of the invisible damage we do to the planet every day.

True cleanliness cannot be measured only by sight. It must also include sustainability.

Cleanliness as Inner Clarity

Outer behavior that is motivated purely by fear, reward, or compulsion lacks real integrity. Cleanliness, in its truest form, must arise from inner clarity. Real cleanliness is possible only when you are clean within. When you are free from that which is not truly you—whether it's conditioning from the body, society, or the marketplace. Spirituality, when rightly understood, is the pursuit of this inner cleanliness—not to gain divine favor, but to live authentically, with integrity and compassion. When one is clean within, they leave every space and every being just a little better. They do not pollute—not the air, not the water, not the mind. There is no violence in their presence. That is cleanliness.

Cleanliness must evolve from a shallow obsession with shine to a deeper commitment to truth and non-violence. It must become a principle that governs how we live, how we relate to others, and how we treat this planet. With this in mind, it's alright to remain a little unclean on the outside than to be polished on the surface while carrying inner filth.

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