

Greenwashing the climate: Our favourite self-deception



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able energy nation.

THE PROBLEM WITH "NON-FOSSIL"

There is also comfort in the phrase *non-fossil*. It sounds green, but the category includes not just solar and wind, but also nuclear power and large hydro projects. Hydro dams have displaced millions of villagers and drowned entire forests. Their reservoirs emit methane, a greenhouse gas with nearly twenty times the warming potential of carbon dioxide.

This makes it worth asking whether all non-fossil energy should automatically be called clean, or whether the label sometimes hides more than it reveals.

EMISSIONS KEEP RISING

If the rise of non-fossil capacity were a sign of decisive progress, India's emissions should have been declining. They are not. In 2023, the country released around 2.8 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide from its energy sector, making it the world's third-largest emitter. The power sector alone contributed about 1.2 billion tonnes that year.

And the effects are already visible. Heatwaves struck 23 states last year. Floods displaced tens of millions. Agriculture, which sustains more than half of India, was left at the mercy of erratic skies. Such events suggest that the challenge is far from behind us.

COAL'S GRIP TIGHTENS

Even as renewable capacity expands, coal's presence has not weakened. India burned a record 1.2 billion tonnes of coal in 2023. More than 20 gigawatts of new coal plants are under construction, with many more planned. Each



India's future, and humanity's, will not be decided by how many targets we meet on paper or how many green labels we parade. It will be decided by whether we can look at ourselves without disguise. The measure of sincerity is not in reaching milestones early, but in reducing the harm we continue to cause.

project commits the country to decades of dependence on the dirtiest fuel known.

So what does the 50 percent milestone really change? It shows progress on the capacity front, but the central challenge—cutting coal dependence and reducing emissions—remains largely untouched. Until that happens, milestones alone will not be enough to shield people already scorched by heat and drowned by floods.

GREENWASHING

Why then do such hollow

victories comfort us? Why do numbers on paper or symbolic acts like sapling plantations feel so satisfying when they change so little? Because the real problem is not industrial, it is in essence, spiritual.

Today, there is even a word for this rising habit of looking eco-virtuous while doing almost nothing of real consequence for the planet. It is called *greenwashing*. Greenwashing is not just what companies do; it is what our minds love. Like whitewashing hides stains,

greenwashing hides guilt. By doing something token, we make ourselves feel moral, while avoiding the truth of our way of life.

SMALL ACTS, BIG ILLUSIONS

Planting trees is perhaps the most common eco-ritual. But the arithmetic exposes the illusion. A strong tree, if it survives 20 years, may absorb about 400 kilograms of carbon dioxide in its lifetime. An average middle-class Indian emits 5,000 kilograms every single year. Over two decades, that is 100,000 kilograms. Even planting a hundred trees cannot offset the scale of one person's lifestyle. And that too assumes the saplings survive, which most do not.

Meanwhile, forests—real, self-sustaining, biodiverse—are cut down to make way for farmland, housing, and industry. Every child born requires food, shelter, clothing, and energy, all of which ultimately demand the fell-

ing of trees. Nearly 70 percent of the world's grain is grown not for people, but to feed animals bred for slaughter. More meat means more farmland, which means more deforestation. Against this backdrop, a sapling in one's backyard is less a solution than a performance.

The same illusion appears in consumer culture. Products today boast of being "CFC-free," though CFCs were banned decades ago. Meat wrapped in paper instead of plastic is marketed as eco-friendly. Companies flaunt recycling drives while their core operations devastate the environment. These are not solutions; they are ways to look responsible without changing what matters.

Why do we accept them? Because the ego, the false self we identify with, seeks comfort, not truth. We would rather feel we have contributed than face the scale of the crisis.

THE WORSHIP OF EXCESS

The deeper dishonesty is this: we admire those who consume the most. Industrialists, celebrities, politicians—their wealth, their private jets, their mansions are celebrated as symbols of success. We do not ask about their carbon footprint; we imitate their lifestyles.

This is our real crime. We may not emit the most, but we idolise those who do. We hand them not only our money but our respect, our votes, our dreams. We let them define what it means to live well. In doing so, we consent to their destruction.

As the saints said: "*Boya ped babool ka, aam kaban se kbaye.*" If we sow thorns, how can we expect sweet fruit? If we keep glorifying those who plunder the Earth, how can we expect the planet to heal?

DOING LESS, NOT MORE

The solution, then, is not to add new eco-friendly gestures on top of the same destructive lifestyle, but to stop that lifestyle itself. We need to stop the obsession with endless production. We need to stop idolising excess population and consumption.

Even science points to the same truth. The principle of entropy in thermodynamics tells us that disorder in any system tends to increase naturally. We pollute when we act, and we pollute again when we try to undo that act. The more we do, the more we disturb. The only real solution is restraint. During the COVID lockdowns, when production and movement paused, skies cleared, rivers ran clean, and animals returned to city streets within weeks. Nature heals quickly when we step aside.

What the Earth needs is not more symbolic action,

but less action. Not more planting, but less cutting. Not more green slogans, but fewer desires that demand destruction.

Beyond Illusion, Towards Truth

The renewable milestone and the sapling plantation share the same root: the human urge to deceive ourselves. Both are mirrors we hold up to feel virtuous while avoiding the truth. Both spring from the ego's refusal to face its own destructiveness.

The climate crisis, then, is not only about energy or carbon dioxide. It is about honesty. Until we confront our addiction to illusions, our need to look moral while continuing as before, the Earth will keep burning.

India's future, and humanity's, will not be decided by how many targets we meet on paper or how many green labels we parade. It will be decided by whether we can look at ourselves without disguise. The measure of sincerity is not in reaching milestones early, but in reducing the harm we continue to cause.

If we cannot drop our illusions, harsher summers and deeper floods will only be the beginning of our loss. And if we continue to cling to these illusions, the punishment awaiting us will only grow harsher.

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