

## Rethinking What It Means to Be Truly Clean

It is time we understand and redefine cleanliness. Is a glittering street in a fuel-hungry city cleaner than a dusty road in a carbon-neutral village? Can a society be clean if it runs on fossil fuels and emits heavily? These questions challenge us to look beyond the surface

**FIRST**  
**Column**



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When we talk about cleanliness, what usually comes to our minds are spotless homes and litter-free streets. We feel good when the floors shine and the dustbins are empty. But have we ever asked ourselves what cleanliness really means? Is it just about what's visible to the eye, or is there something far more harmful than dust or litter? Most of us equate cleanliness with what's visible: what we can see, touch, or smell. In doing so, we may be ignoring a far more crucial aspect.

It is often asked why people from South Asia become more conscious about cleanliness when they are abroad. The answer isn't really about nationality; it has to do with human nature, our tendency to modify our actions in response to external stimuli rather than from an internal understanding.

When someone's conduct is based on outer factors, it reveals that the change is not arising from an inner understanding but an external pressure. A person living in India may litter carelessly. When living overseas, the same person may suddenly become very strict about following rules, not because they have grown genuinely responsible, but because they are afraid of penalties, being watched, or being judged by others. This type of behaviour is unconscious and reactive. As soon as the external pressures go away, the old habits return.

It is clear that the problem is not merely cultural or location-based. The real issue lies deeper in the human mind.

### Cleanliness through an economic lens

We must also view cleanliness through an economic lens. It is unrealistic to expect people to put appearance first when they are fighting for basic necessities like food, shelter, or safety. When survival is at stake, environmental cleanliness isn't crucial.

We rarely see wealthy nations that are visibly unclean or poor nations that look spotless from the outside. This is just an illustration of how economic conditions change priorities.

When survival is the top priority, cleanliness becomes a thing of luxury. Only when families achieve economic stability do issues like waste management and community health become real priorities. Economic stability lets people look beyond basic needs and care for communal well-being.

Even in India, well-off communities often manage to keep their surroundings as clean as those in developed countries. This proves that the



issue is more situational than cultural. What leads to development and cleanliness in one country may not apply to another. A variety of elements, including geography, history, leadership, and external influence, combine to generate material prosperity. Economic wealth makes it easier to focus on keeping the environment clean; poverty makes it difficult to focus on anything beyond day-to-day survival.

Reducing the question of cleanliness to race or nationality is unfair. It overlooks the deeper, structural factors.

### The covert violence of progress

In today's world, cleanliness is often reduced to appearance. But what happens when appearance hides harm? A modern, high-tech slaughterhouse might look clean, with shiny floors, polished tools, and no blood in sight. But the violence and cru-

elty inside that slaughterhouse cannot be denied. On the other hand, imagine a small Indian rural hospital. Despite cracked tiles and peeling walls, it fulfils its purpose of healing and care. In this context, cleanliness isn't just about appearance; it's also about the impact that an action has on others.

Now picture an electric SUV: shiny, quiet, and labelled eco-friendly. But if it's charging off electricity generated by coal and consuming resources just to carry one person comfortably, is it really any better than what it replaced? In contrast, an old diesel train puffing black smoke, yet transporting 1,000 people efficiently, has a much smaller impact per person. Cleanliness isn't about shine and glitter, but about how our decisions affect society, nature, and the mind. We must weigh the psychological, social, and environmental costs of our actions.

### The hidden footprint of modern progress

When societies obsess over a shiny, surface-level version of cleanliness — polished skyscrapers, manicured lawns, sparkling cars — while ignoring massive carbon footprints, water waste, and resource exploitation, they create a much deeper kind of filth. Imagine someone taking four showers a day in a desert country where water is scarce or a lush garden kept alive by thousands of gallons of precious water.

All this, while millions of people still lack access to clean drinking water. This superficial version of cleanliness comes at a huge cost. It is essentially violence, not just against nature, but against people, and eventually oneself. And it comes from overconsumption and putting appearance before real sustainability.

The World Resources Institute says that if every

country consumed like the US, we would need the equivalent of five Earths to sustain that level of consumption. Just because something looks spotless doesn't make it clean. Cleanliness, in a real sense, means living in a way that is truly sensitive to oneself and the planet.

### Beyond what meets the eye

It is time we understand and redefine cleanliness. Is a glittering street in a fuel-hungry city cleaner than a dusty road in a carbon-neutral village? Can a society be clean if it runs on fossil fuels and emits heavily? These questions challenge us to look beyond the surface, and should be asked more frequently.

Here is the contradiction: the very countries we praise for their "cleanliness" often rank among the worst offenders in harming the environment. For example, according to the Global Carbon Project, the United States, despite its clean streets and strict hygiene standards, accounts for nearly 15 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions.

Meanwhile, a small, messy village may have little to no carbon footprint. Is it the trash scattered on the streets or the invisible fumes that are slowly suffocating our planet?

Litter is ugly, no doubt, but it's the emissions we don't see that are far more dangerous. If carbon dioxide had a colour, we'd see it swirling everywhere, covering so-called clean cities in a choking haze, as a constant reminder of the damage we cause. Cleanliness can't just be about how things look. It must reflect how responsibly we walk on the planet. Only then can we honestly claim to be clean.

### Inner cleanliness is true cleanliness

When our actions come only from fear, the hope for rewards, or social pressure, they lack inner honesty. True cleanliness starts inside us. You're truly clean only when you have clarity within — when you're no longer driven by borrowed identities or compulsions picked up from the world.

Spirituality, in essence, is just this: to live with inner clarity. Not for show, not to gain favour with some higher power, but to live a truthful life based on self-knowledge.

When someone lives with inner understanding, they naturally bring cleanliness externally as well. They leave no clutter — neither in the world nor in the minds they touch. This is what real cleanliness looks like.

We need to put aside our preoccupation with appearances and reaffirm our dedication to truth and sensitivity towards the environment.

Real cleanliness should guide our lives and relationships. In that light, it is alright to be a little messy on the outside than to appear spotless outside while carrying inner grime.

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