

**Clean and Dirty:  
Cross-cultural  
Misunderstandings**

to E.M.Q.  
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## **CLEAN AND DIRTY: Cross-cultural Misunderstandings.**

Paul G. Hiebert

Few experiences in our first cross-cultural encounters impresses us more than our sense of dirtiness and cleanness. This is certainly true when we go to India. When we walk out of our guest house we are overwhelmed by a sensory overload: people everywhere, vivid colors, temple and movie music blaring from loudspeakers, Muslim calls to prayer, and smells--perfumes, incense, foods, cow and human dung--overwhelm and confuse us. But it is the filth that first attracts our attention.

### **Cultural Impressions**

For many Americans, the first impressions of India have to do with dirt: rotting garbage on the road side, plastic bags draped on shrubs, open festering sewers, dung--cow, dog and human-- on the road, and dirt and dust everywhere. The chaos extends to driving in which trucks, buses, steam rollers, tractors, cars, motor rickshaws, cycles, ox carts, people, cows, water buffalo, sheep, and stray dogs negotiate their individual ways with little apparent concern for the 'rules of the road.' The result is chaos shock--the sense that life has no order to it, is out of control and is dirty.

Indians have their first impressions of Americans. They are awed by the public cleanliness. Lawns are manicured, buildings freshly painted, streets are clean, and sewers are hidden underground,. People drive in polished, undented cars observing well marked lanes, stopping at stop lights, and waiting for oncoming traffic to pass before turning. They are shocked, however, at Americans' personal filthiness. In public--in schools, stores, movie theaters and buses they wear old, dirty, torn jeans, and shorts that cover nothing, T shirts covered

with ads, and unpolished, gaudy sports shoes—beggars' clothes. In India the beggars at least try to patch their torn pants and shirts. Women wear the same drab dress as men. They keep their shoes on when they enter their houses, and even in churches when they enter the presence of God. It is clear that they can afford better respectful dress, so why do they take better care of their streets, yards and cars than themselves?!

If you look more closely, Americans eat with forks and spoons that have been in other people's mouths, and with their fingers without washing them. They use their right hands in toilets and use paper to clean themselves, something they never do to clean their plates. Indians eat with their fingers, which have not been in other people's mouths, and use only the right hand because the left hand is kept for dirty activities. Americans eat meat, even beef, which defiles them, and gives them a strong body odor that vegetarians can smell. They touch each other in greeting, and are polluted by those more ritually impure than they.

### **Going Below the Surface**

After their initial shock, Americans must stop and take a deeper look. They encounter a paradox. More than any other culture, India is based on deep beliefs in purity and pollution, which touch every area of life. It may have a reputation for its public filth, but it is obsessive about personal cleanliness. Men come out of small huts wearing their best shirts, ties and trousers, washed and pressed, and freshly polished shoes. Women dress in brightly colored, clean feminine cloths, and coolly drive motorcycles, or ride sidesaddle behind their husbands, their silk scarves and sariis blowing in the wind. Restaurants have public sinks for people to wash their hands before eating. Houses are swept clean daily, and outside entryways coated with

a fresh layer of earth and cowdung to make them clean, and decorated with flowers and designs traced out with white powder. People brush their teeth and comb their hair almost obsessively, They do so in public and want people to see their concern for cleanliness and public dignity.

Indian's concern for purity and abhorance of pollution goes much deeper than surface dirt that can be washed off. The people are concerned about deep, inner pollution, the defilement of the self. Manual work, such as scavenging, tanning, burying the dead and cutting hair involves touching dead objects, and is most defiling. Laundering clothes, cleaning houses and sweeping yards and streets are polluting because those involved must handle refuse. This caste based defilement is permanent and hereditary, handed down from parents to children. The only release from this pollution is the hope that in one's next life one is born a pure Brahmin or other high caste person.

One can also acquire personal pollution by touching things that are polluted. High caste people should not touch low caste people, or they will be defiled. To cleanse themselves from such pollution they must go through an extensive cleansing ritual that cleans their inner beings. Consequently, they have a ritual greetings, like our handshakes, but which do not involve touching one another. Sexual relationships and marriages between people of different castes is very defiling, particularly for children that are born from the union, because they are unclean to embers of their parents two castes.

When we go to India, we need to learn to see how Indians see purity and pollution, and to reexamine our own beliefs of clean and dirty. Keep in mind that India is known for its personal cleanliness and its public filth, and America for its public cleanliness and personal filth.

We need, also, to avoid judging their beliefs using our own, but examine both in the light of the Gospel, which has much to say about what is clean and what is dirty. As starters, we need to avoid being culturally insensitive, and of trying to impose our cultural ways on the people we meet. Here are a few preliminary recommendations.

- please, *please* leave your jeans, old T shirts and gaudy sports shoes at home, and women your shorts and short skirts. To wear these in public insults your hosts, and shames them among their peers. It disregards their deep cultural concerns for cleanliness. Remember, when you dress for yourself, you dress down, for comfort. When you dress to honor others, you dress up. Show respect for your hosts by dressing up when you go out in public. particular, dress up to go to church to show honor to God. To think that you are there to teach them to wear jeans and T shirts is crass cultural imperialism, worse than the colonialism of old missionaries whom we so often criticize. They learned the language, lived and identified with the people, dressed up in public, and often wore native clothes.
- Make public displays of your cleanliness. Wash your hands before you eat at the sink in the restaurant, brush your teeth in public after eating, and above all, do not touch your food with your left hand—it is *filthy*.
- Keep your hair neat and trimmed,. Unkempt hair is a sign of unclean personal habits.
- Avoid eating meat as much as possible in public, especially beef. Remember, meat eating is a sign of very dirty people.

Above all, learn from your hosts. It first they may be hesitant to criticize you, but as you build trust, they can help you to be seen as clean and respectable people in the villages and cities of India.

# **Missionaries as Mediators in a Glocal World**

or

~~**Modeling Global Leadership**~~

for

**Remapping the Mission Discourse:  
A feistschrift in honor of the  
Rev. George Chavanikamannil**

P. V. Joseph and S Samuel eds.

Dear Dr. Hiebert

We are sorry to hear about your sickness. We want to assure you of our prayers and our community here and trust for God's healing.

We deeply appreciate your desire to participate in the Festschrift to honor Rev. George Chavanikamannil. Dr. Simon and I have read through your suggestions carefully. We agree with you, that a revised form of your first article that deals with "missionaries... (being) bridge persons who mediate between different socio-cultural worlds" will fit our project. We would appreciate if you could kindly do the revision of this article and send it to us at a convenient time. We have set the deadline for submission of articles for the end of June 2007. We hope all friends who are writing for this important project will keep this deadline.

We would appreciate if you could kindly send us an abstract of the article and your resumé along with the article.

We would request your prayers for this important project and other writers who will contribute to the Festschrift. We look forward to a wonderful time as we celebrate God's faithfulness in the life of George Chavanikamannil and in this community.

With blessings and prayers

Your brothers in Christ,

Simon and Joseph

**Paul G Hiebert** <[phiebert@juno.com](mailto:phiebert@juno.com)> wrote:

Dear Dr. Joseph and Dr. Samuel,

I just received your letters regarding honoring Rev. George Chavanikamannil. I am delighted to hear of this honoring. Rev. Chavanikamannil deserves our greatest thanks for his life long ministry for the church. And to be honored by two leaders such as yourselves adds greatly to the occasion.

I am delighted to contribute something to a book in Rev. Chavanikamannil's honor. The questions would be the time limit, the length of the chapter, and the topic. Currently I am teaching a full load at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, two courses on the doctoral level and one at the master's level. I am also finishing a book on transforming worldviews, and writing a couple articles on issues I am concerned about. I have written two draft articles that might fit your desire to remap the mission scene for the 21st century. Those of us who grew up in the old modern, colonial and now post-modern, post-colonial eras of missions see the need for a new paradigm for a world that is

increasingly global and at the same time reaffirming locals. It must take the fact that the center of Christianity and missions has moved from the West to the young churches around the world. It must deal with the rapidly changing world, and the rise of violence and terrorism. It must be built on a theology of suffering, not triumphalism--something the western churches cannot even conceive.

The first article I have written, which can be revised to fit your vision has to do with the fact that missionaries in the future will increasingly be bridge persons who mediate between different sociocultural worlds. In this sense they must be people who can function in several cultures with comfort and skill, and yet be 'outside' any of the cultures in which they serve. If they are inside one culture and visitors to the others, they will never be able to represent others to the local people. Being intercultural mediators, or multicultural people requires a transformation in their thinking as monocultural people, and the ability to enter into and participate deeply in other cultures. It also means they must represent other cultures to the people in ways the others want to be represented. I believe this is key necessity for developing not only inter-denominational but also international church unity. Not unity through uniformity, but unity as we work together, each bringing our strengths, and a new global hermeneutical and missiological community.

The second paper I have written but not published has to do with modeling globalization in leadership. This is more narrowly focused, and focuses primarily on the requisites for leaders who are emerging on the global church scene. They must be multicultural; as noted above, but here the focus is more narrow on their personal leadership foci and styles.

If you have another suggestion, please let me know. I have written on the changing views on contextualization, but this is going to be published in a book here in a year or two.

Again, let me thank you for the privilege of hearing about the coming honoring of our dear brother who has modeled for us all a Christlike ministry in a global world. Let me know if you want me to work on any of the above articles, or to work on a new topic that you might suggest. I am currently being treated for cancer in the lung cavity, but the Lord willing I will have a few years of strength to cheer on the younger leaders who are taking on the great task of missions in the 21st century.

Your brother in Christ,

Paul G. Hiebert

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