

## **CLEAN AND DIRTY: Cross-cultural Misunderstandings.**

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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 saris 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.