

'CLEAN INDIA' Calls for an Ethical Fibre!

The ugly face of India by way of its filth-filled and polluted atmosphere makes India incredibly disreputable in the international scenario



BY DR M.D. THOMAS

It was May-June 2014. I was in Australia. I travelled through the roads of the cities and townships of Melbourne, Sydney, New Castle and Singleton as well as the countryside. It is highly edifying to have seen systems in place all over. The sense of cleanliness, the sense of order and the environment-friendly atmosphere made me feel so indescribably nice. There have been lots of greenery, clean air and favourable temper as well as efficiency, law and order, enlightened citizenship, and the like.

Soon, I was taken aback. I couldn't help remember my India that is world famous for its homeliness with filthy surroundings. So much so, that approximately one third of India is like an open toilet and half of India is like a garbage box. But, as for Australia, it appears that filth is not produced there at all. Or else, people in Australia are not accustomed to displaying their waste in public. Or better, they know well how to manage their waste. But, we Indians do not feel at home when garbage is not found spread all over, awkwardly so. Indeed, Indians are incredible! Indians, with a much higher capacity for corruption, can not only tolerate, but also accommodate all sorts of rubbish around and sleep comfortably.

A few years ago, an ambassador of a certain Embassy in New Delhi was addressing his send-off get-together. He



remarked, 'India is certainly an incredible country. But, presuming your permission, let me add, India is incredible, also in the negative sense'. Without doubt, he appreciated the merits of the country, in the first half of his remark. But, in the second half, he seems to have meant also that India is truly unbelievable by virtue of its negativities. The ugly face of India by way of its filth-filled and polluted atmosphere makes India incredibly disreputable in the international scenario.

During my visit to London in 2009, I was once at a bus stop, waiting for the bus. After a little while, a local gentleman joined me at the bus stop. In next to no time, I saw him bending down and picking up a piece of paper from the bus stop and depositing in the dustbin. The sight brought me to my senses. In fact, I had seen it through the corner of my eyes. But, my preoccupation with catching the bus, that too, in an alien land, kept me slightly tense. Even otherwise, I am not sure whether my 'Indian blood'



would motivate me to do what he did. Anyway, I felt little ashamed that my civic sense was not awakened enough to do it. All the same, my conscience whispered to me that we Indians have much to learn from the gentleman, for his timely and creditable civic gesture.

V. Raghunathan, in his thought-provoking book 'Games Indians Play' asks the most soul-searching question about Indians 'why are we the way we are?' Have the thirty-three crores of gods and goddesses in India encoded our genes to behave in public places shamelessly? Is it our fate to litter, spit and urinate anywhere we like, as animals do instinctively as it comes? Are we condemned to behave in an uncivilized and selfishly ruthless way, so foolishly so, especially in common spaces that are worthy of a superior dignity? Is it not that, amidst the colloquium of civilizations in the world, the Indian civilization has a certain fundamental screw loose?

On the whole, majority of the Indians have a high sense of ritual purity. They have a scrupulous theory of purity (saatviktaa), in terms of the items of food eaten and the way religious rites are performed. Normally, they keep the inside of the houses fairly clean, too. All the same, they have no scruple for throwing the dirt from one's house to the roads or to the neighbours' side. This self-interested and discriminative behaviour is a blatant case in point for an inbuilt hypocrisy in Indians as to one's own needs and as to that of others. It also smacks of the incapacity to consider the public space as having something to do with oneself. The sense of purity is coiled around whatever is one's own and gets exhausted as it reaches the so called 'other' or public. While proclaiming the idea of 'vasudhaiv kutukbakam' from housetops, is it not a blatant contradiction in behaviour? How could the Indian theory shatter so badly when it comes

to practice, so much so that the other doesn't get any space?

Indians in general are like a vehicle without 'self-start'. The system does not function automatically. The brain needs to be provoked, warned or controlled. At times, it is on ventilator, and at times, on crutches. It doesn't get motivated by good examples, too. Fear seems to be the only thing that works in India. If a flying squad of police goes around, some people get alert. If there is no traffic police around, traffic lights wouldn't catch the attention of a large number of drivers on the road. Doing spontaneously what one feels like doing, in a childish way, is the essential psychic make-up of Indians, with very little exception. This mind-set is reflected in the unhygienic surroundings in India. Is this the picture of India we eloquently boast of?

Indians are unique in heaping up superlative adjectives for the country. 'Saare jahaan se achhaa', 'Mera Bharat Mahaan', 'India Shining', etc. are

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some of the oft-repeated slogans. Most of the Indians take pride in the 'Indian culture', without realizing that the filthy and polluted environment of India brings shame to the so called Indian culture or nullifies any culture totally. Certain fundamentalist factions advocate that India is 'vishvaguru'. But, they seem to be least aware that they have hardly anything to teach the world. The real lessons of Indian culture are demonstrated on the roads, parks, railway stations, bus stations, governmental offices, the red pan-spit-clad classrooms and other public places. Coming out of the empty superior claims and mending the inferior habits that contribute to grimy surroundings is the need of the hour. One needs to move ahead, before the soil of the ground one treads erodes. If not, great will be his or her fall!

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common places? Are all the miscreants from the illiterate and downtrodden sections of the society? In other words, are the educated and the elite free from offenses of being a public nuisance by committing stinking acts as above? It is shocking to realize that a very high percentage of people who misbehave in public places are from the more or less educated sector. That would bring us face to face with the radical question whether expensive modern education liberates one from the negative habits at all. If education does not contribute to becoming cultured persons, especially in civic spaces, what is the utility of the laborious process of education? Perhaps, simple animals would laugh at the rationality of the humans, when the so called rational animals litter and pollute the society. Isn't it suicidal to the dignity of the humans?

Indians do not mince words when they boast about the religious character of the country. India is indeed a religious country by way of the presence of diverse major and minor religious traditions. No country in the world spends so much time in prayers, rites and other religious engagements. Vast majority of the people in India would happily forgo all their duties when it is a question of devotion and religion. But, much of the above religious engagement does not produce any ethic in life, indeed ironically so. 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness', thus goes the maxim. But, unfortunately, the consciousness of the sense of sacred is mostly understood as exclusive to places of worship. One's religion or God-consciousness does not motivate one to consider the entire society and nature the abode of God and to keep it clean and godly. All religious sense seems to collapse in day-to-day life, as regards values of life. It appears that Indians have a long way to go before they can claim to belong to a religious country, considering the basic ethics religions are supposed to produce.

Countries of the west stand first in the world with regard to an intelligent way of waste management. Systems are in place. Responsible civic ways have gone into the blood of the people. Indians who reside or even visit abroad learn from the systems and fall in line with the behavioural pattern of the place. But, even most of those west-returned Indians do not falter to throw garbage in wrong places when they are in India. Is it that the soil of India is a licensed area for default behaviour and that all those who are born in India have an innate license to do what they want? Delhi metro system is an eloquent proof for the fact that Indians are not gone cases and they can be brought to the track if appropriate systems are erected. It is true that



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India is very much a system-less country, with regard to public behaviour, time keeping, work culture, etc. It will definitely be wise for Indians to import some systems for the refined, comfortable and efficient running of daily life. We Indians have much to learn from the world before we go to teach it. To make it a reality, Indians have to rise up from the whimsical world of instincts.

The Indian mind-set and age-old tradition can be summarized as 'it is my birth right and privilege to litter; it is the birth duty of someone else to clean'. This is in fact an absurd philosophy. On realistic terms, I need to revise my attitude to myself as the one having only rights and the other having only duties. I am eligible to get my rights, if only I perform my duties to the other. Rights and duties are to be balanced in the larger context of the society. It is my basic duty not to litter and dirty the public premises. It is also my duty to take initiative to clean up the neighbourhoods, public places, etc. 'Leave the place better than you found it' could be the dictum that can leave the toilets sanitary, bus stations and railway stations clean and roads and other public places hygienic. Making a clean environment as well as keeping the nature unpolluted calls for an ethic of life. Indians have to build up and strengthen their ethical fibre. The religious and educational sectors as well as the common sense should assist in constructing an ethically-tuned conscience. 'Clean India' would be the runway for taking off for any development worth the name.

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