DIRT AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

By MURRAY MILNER, JR.

THE VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW

DIRT AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

By MURRAY MILNER, JR.

Dirt is one of your strongest first impressions: the smell of raw sewage, garbage piled on street corners, a griminess about most objects in public places, people urinating on the street, air pollution which not only burns your eyes and nostrils but sometimes significantly reduces driving visibility, the red stains in stair wells where people have spit while chewing pan and betel nut, and, perhaps most of all, the social dirt—beggars, and colonies of shacks where thousands live with an absence of even the most essential amenities.

For one who has been to India before and returned after a lapse of years there is a second impression that is equally strong and in some ways more unexpected: rapid and significant economic development. New buildings are under construction everywhere. At least three major sports stadiums were built for the last Asian games. Widened roads with huge overpasses (called "flyovers") at major intersections. These roads are something between the usual city streets and a Western expressway and are clogged with traffic. India produces virtually all the motor vehicles on its roads. While India's per capita production is still low, foreigners often fail to grasp the size and scope of India's industrial capacity. India mines about 130 million metric tons of coal annually, which is more than is produced by the United Kingdom, West Germany, or Australia. India's crude steel production is about two thirds of that of Britain and about 30 percent higher than Australia's. India produces about 140 billion kilowatt hours of electricity per year compared to about 105 billion for Austra-

lia. The train system is enormous. While the British laid the foundation for the system, it has been greatly expanded and modernized since independence. It is now one of the largest passenger systems in the world, providing more than 220 million passenger kilometers of service annually, compared to 17 million for the U.S., 28 million for Great Britain, and 150 million for China.

The production of goods and services for consumers is also growing. Delhi probably has as many luxury hotels as any city in the world. Some of these are opulent in construction—marble is used everywhere on interior surfaces—and the service is extravagant if not always precisely what is wanted. The Oberoi chain, which is wholly owned and operated by Indians, now has hotels throughout India and in Australia, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. They advertise in elite publications like *The New Yorker* and are fully competitive with other international hotel companies. Television and video sets are common among the middle class. At most shopping areas in Delhi you can purchase or rent video cassettes of the latest Western movies and TV series, including an ample supply of pornographic materials. The bus I took from Bangalore to Mysore in South India was equipped with video and showed a three-hour Hindi movie. India has the second largest movie industry in the world, surpassed only by the U.S. Electronic calculators are easily purchased at about the same prices as in the West. Refrigerators, washing machines, and an array of kitchen appliances are available. Most of these items are manufactured—not just assembled—in India; the country imports practically no consumer commodities. A stunning array of clothes and textiles are for sale. For handicrafts, fabrics, clothes, and leather goods, Delhi is now the bargain capital of the world, roughly comparable to the Hong Kong of 25 years ago.

A large urban middle class is emerging that is part cause and part effect in this process of economic growth. It contributes to economic development by providing a very large

market for consumer commodities. Depending on the definition used, somewhere between 3 and 30 percent of the population can arguably be classified as middle-class. Even if we use the lowest figure this means a potential middle-class market of 22 million people—only a little less than the population of Canada and more than twice the population of Sweden. If we take the highest percentage estimate, this middle class is larger than the entire population of the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., or the European Common Market. Whatever definition or method of estimation is used, India has an enormous potential market for middle-class consumer goods. This makes it possible to begin and expand industries that would be unfeasible in smaller countries at a similar level of development.

This "middle class" is not an homogeneous entity. At one end is the high government civil servant or the fashionable physician who lives in Defense Colony or Haus Kaus in South Delhi. The other extreme is the petty bazaar merchant or door-to-door salesman whose housing may not have indoor plumbing but who has managed to acquire enough savings to buy a TV or perhaps even a motor scooter. The group includes real estate agents, sales people, drivers of buses, taxis, and trucks, shop owners, professionals, military personnel, and a multitude of government and company clerks.

A minority—but a substantial minority—of this class has accumulated sizeable amounts of wealth. The family that ran a seemingly very modest stationery shop which I frequented in Defence Colony Market had been to London and California on vacation. The larger owners of capital are acquiring fortunes that are comparable to those made during the industrial revolutions in the U.S. and Europe. They—and to even a greater extent their children—have become part of the international jet set, spending substantial periods of the year in London, Paris, and New York. It is this group and their immediate subordinates that seem to keep Delhi's numerous luxury hotels (and their supporting restaurants and discos) thriving. During much of the period I was in Delhi, following

the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the resulting riots, there were few tourists. And yet these luxury establishments seemed to be doing a lively business.

Throughout all of India's modern history, the political elite has unquestionably had more prestige than economic and commercial elites and has probably had more overall power. This was true under the British; members of the Indian Civil Service clearly ranked above merchants, shippers, and tea planters. It certainly continued after independence and was reflected in the fact that the highest dowries could be commanded by young men who had obtained appointments to the elite government services. While this situation still exists in broad outline, the business and commercial classes seem to be moving up fast. Depending on their incomes, the prestige of their company, and the perceived security of their position, they are becoming increasingly desirable as grooms for arranged marriages. Following in the British tradition, the private club has tended to be the hub of socializing for the Indian urban elite. This tradition continues, though these more exclusive but more modest centers of socializing now face serious competition from the commercial hotels, restaurants, and clubs. Appropriately enough, it is primarily businessmen rather than civil servants who can regularly afford the more expensive hotels and restaurants. The Gymkana Club is located in one of New Delhi's most prestigious neighborhoods—close to the prime minister's official residence. The property includes several city blocks of what must be some of Delhi's most expensive real estate. Until near the end of the colonial period Indians were excluded from its premises except in the role of employees and members' servants. Since independence, it has been the meeting place for politicians, civil servants, journalists, and military officers—who not infrequently take up a second career after retirement. Business people are represented in the membership, but government and military officers have dominated the club.

In India the importance of clubs and public places of

entertainment takes on special importance. Even many highly Westernized Indians have had qualms about sharing food in their homes with those of other castes. Since independence, the Indian civil service and military have probably been more free from ethnic, caste, and religious influences than almost any other Third World country. But professional associations are a very different matter from close friendship and kinship, and hence entertaining people in one's home has been very problematic for some. This has accentuated the importance of the relatively neutral territory of the club as a center of entertainment and socializing for India's urban elite.

Given the importance of the club as a place where the elite meet, it is all the more telling that the Gymkana Club—arguably the premier club of New Delhi and India—has an ambiance of slow deterioration. While a matronly elegance remains, it is a monument of the past. The food is not bad, but is unspectacular compared to the lavish buffets which are served at the better hotels. The Gymkana Club is still the place where the influential meet. But like the premises, the power of the political, governmental, and intellectual elite, which have traditionally been its clientele, is on the wane. This power is increasingly challenged by the commercial elite who frequent the new hotels. It is much too early to say what the precise outcome of this development will be; it is by no means certain that the business and commercial interests will come to unequivocally dominate the society. Nonetheless, India is clearly a much more bourgeois society than it was 25 or even ten years ago.

While the middle class is clearly becoming more prosperous, the fate of the vast majority of the population is more uncertain. On average, life seems to be improving for people in the villages but less dramatically than for the urban middle class. The increased prosperity of some is paralleled by the impoverishment of others. Many agricultural and artisan jobs, which in the past have offered some level of security and penurious subsistence, are disappearing, leaving unemploy-

ment and acute poverty. The economic development I have described cannot obscure the fact that the average Indian is still extremely poor by Western criteria. Still, this fundamental fact should not cause one to overlook the important economic development now in progress.

II

My thesis is that dirt and development are two of the most striking characteristics of contemporary India. Yet so often is the Western visitor overwhelmed by poverty and dirt, the significant improvements are overlooked. Dirt existing alongside of development may seem contradictory. Should not development begin to transform dirt into cleanliness? How can a society that is so stunningly dirty—and some would say getting worse in this respect—also be in the midst of fundamental economic growth?

There are at least two answers to this question. First, development nearly always produces dirt. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx made this comment about early capitalist development: "Dirt—this stagnation and putrefaction of man—the sewage of civilization (speaking quite literally)—comes to be an element of life for him. Utter unnatural neglect, putrefied nature, comes to be his life-element." Even if we discount Marx's hyperbole, it is true that economic growth often is accompanied by new kinds of dirt and pollutions. Certainly, in the mid-19th-century, London, not to speak of Engel's Manchester; was not noted for its pristine cleanliness. Nearly all urban centers in the midst of rapid development have their share of dirt and filth. Urbanization per se seems to create problems in maintaining cleanliness, as New York, Newark, and New Orleans all know. Since economic development in India and elsewhere is linked to urbanization, it is not surprising that development leads to more dirt.

While there is undoubtedly some truth in this first answer, it is too simple. Dirt in India is not only or even primarily a

result of growth and urbanization. Other Asian cities are experiencing rapid growth but their level of dirt seems different from that of Indian cities. Something is distinctive, if not unique, about the quantity and quality of dirt in India. If India is to be understood, we must understand the nature of this distinctiveness.

First, we must answer a preliminary question: What is dirt? In her near classic work, *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas says that dirt is simply matter that is out of place. Dirt is a form of disorder defined only in relationship to some system of order. The point is obvious—after it has been said. The rich earth of the Mississippi River delta or an Iowa cornfield may be soil but is not truly dirt until it is on the living room carpet. In other words, dirt is deviance. When a sportsman breaks the rules, it is a "foul"—a word whose fundamental meaning is rotten or putrid—and one who commits a foul deliberately is a "dirty" player. An older male who is too sexually aggressive is a "dirty old man." Hence, if we are to understand the prevalence of dirt in India, we must examine the implicit system of order. Only by understanding a society's system of order can we understand the nature of its dirt.

In traditional India dirt is primarily social rather than physical. In the past Indians have been more fundamentally concerned about the social cleanliness and purity of groups than the physical cleanliness of individuals or objects. Stated another way, the kind of order that has been most important to Indians is social order rather than physical orderliness. Indians are not indifferent to the order and cleanliness of physical objects—far from it. But the most important kind of order concerns the appropriate relationship between social categories of people. What constitutes physical cleanliness is largely derived from the nature of social purity; physical order is defined by the nature of the social order.

At the core of this traditional social order is the caste system, a complex and controversial human institution whose roots extend deep into antiquity.

According to the classical religious texts, the population is divided into four ranked categories called varnas: the Brahmans who are priests, the Kshatriyas who are warriors, the Vaisyas who are farmers and merchants, and the Sudras who are the servants and laborers. In addition to these four categories there are the untouchables, who are in principle outside the system but in fact are an integral part of it. In the actual society—in contrast to the classical texts—each of these five categories is in turn subdivided into more specific castes that tend to be associated with a traditional occupation. There are hundreds, if not thousands of castes that are members of the Sudra varna: barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, potters, cowherders, flower growers, vegetable gardeners, grain parchers, tailors, and bangle makers—to mention only a few of the most common Sudra castes. These are categories rather than actual social groups. There may be thousands of local caste groups that fall into or compose one of the caste categories.

The actual caste structure in a given local area is composed of a small proportion of all of these possible categories. There are nearly always some type of Brahmans and an array of Sudra castes in a local area. Often there will also be groups that claim Kshatriya or Vaisya status, but in many areas these groups are not represented. These local caste units range in size from a few hundred to maybe tens of thousands and are the actual social groups that make up the system. A local caste or *jati* is a network of people who know each other or know someone who can vouch for the legitimacy of someone else's claim to be a member of their caste. Usually these local groups are endogamous. That is, they marry within this group or select spouses from an allied group of very similar status. It is not uncommon for there to be more than one of these local endogamous groups belonging to the same caste category in a given area. For example, there are often more than one group of Brahmans or cowherders in a given area who do not intermarry or dine together, even though from the point of view of other people they belong to the same caste. But

from their own perspective substantial enough differences may exist among all those called cowherders so that there are quite distinctive segments who do not intermarry or dine together.

These local groups are hierarchically ranked with the Brahmans at the top and the untouchables at the bottom. In a local area there is usually general agreement about what groups are at the top and the bottom of this hierarchy. The exact ranking of those groups in the middle is subject to dispute, but most of the disagreement is over whether a particular caste is just above or just below another local caste group, not over the general location of these castes in the local hierarchy.

If the elementary concern has been social order, then the essential thing that had to be kept ordered—and hence clean—were social categories. People must not be allowed to stray out of their categories, for to do so is to create the worst kind of disorder—religious and social—and to threaten others with the most contaminating kind of dirt and impurity. It would be considered a terrible event if a Brahman were to fall into a cesspool full of human excrement. But, at least in the past, this would be nothing compared to the permanent contamination resulting if that Brahman's daughter were to marry someone of a lower caste.

We may have seemed to stray from our focus on dirt, but we have not. For a fundamental determinant of a caste's ranking in the local and societal hierarchy is based upon the level of purity or impurity attributed to a particular caste group. According to Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*, the most widely read scholarly book on caste, the characteristics of the system "rest on one fundamental conception and are reducible to a single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure. This opposition underlies the hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must likewise be kept separate, and underlies the division of labor because the pure and the impure occupations must be kept

separate." Dumont's work is controversial, but hardly anyone would deny that concern about purity and impurity are a central feature of the caste system. Moreover, most would agree that notions of physical cleanliness and dirtiness are integrally related to notions of the social status of different caste groups.

III

Because ideas about physical cleanliness and the concepts of social purity from which they derive are from one to three thousand years old, they are not completely congruent with a Western germ theory of disease. For example, water, used in the ritually appropriate manner, is religiously purifying even though it may be highly contaminated with pathological organisms. Washing one's clothes in such water may or may not reduce the bacteria count of the cloth, but it does make them ritually pure. Stated another way, the elaborate efforts at purification may restore order—and hence cleanliness—from the Hindu religious point of view, but it may or may not increase sanitation from a Western scientific point of view. What appears to foreigners as India's dirtiness is not caused primarily by Indians' lack of understanding of modern concepts of sanitation. Other systems of order and purity simply have a higher priority. What makes the situation particularly confusing is that at certain points classical Indian notions of purity and modern Western concepts overlap to a significant degree. For example, the Indian preoccupation with frequent bathing, washing of clothes, and cleansing of cooking utensils obviously has much in common with Western notions. But the crucial difference is that even if it was demonstrable that such washing increased rather than decreased the prevalence of pathogens, such actions would still be considered essential in order to maintain one's religious purity and hence one's social status. On the other hand, better sewer systems do not necessarily affect one's social status and may—for reasons we will take up later—actually lower it.

Hence if the first key to understanding the distinctiveness of India's dirt is to recognize that social order is considered more important than physical order, the second key point is that the nature of physical cleanliness implicit in the Indian social order is not precisely the same as that in the modern West.

The third point is that in traditional India cleanliness and purity are to a significant degree an inexpansible resource: if some are to be clean and pure, others must remain polluted. This is related to the concept of dirt being rooted in social relations. The purity of the upper caste was in large measure dependent upon having lower castes responsible for the removal of waste and dirt. Most untouchables and the lower status Shudra castes are traditionally associated with occupations involving the removal of dirt and filth. "Sweepers," who are at the bottom of the hierarchy, traditionally cleaned the outhouses of the upper caste and removed the dead carcasses of nonfarm animals. (More accurately, sweepers removed all animals who did not have hooves; a slightly higher caste removed hoofed animals.) Today those sweepers who live in the cities are usually the municipal garbage collectors. Barbers remove hair and nail pairings and in South India clean the bodies of the dead. Washermen clean clothes but are especially stigmatized because they are expected to clean clothes soiled by menstrual blood. The key point is that in the traditional concepts of Hinduism, for some caste to be clean and ritually pure, others must be dirty. In the language of game theory, cleanliness and purity are to a significant degree a zero-sum resource; there is only so much to go around; the question is how will it be distributed. Hence public sanitation systems, which raise the status of the work done by lower caste and untouchables, may be seen as a threat by the upper caste orthodox.

This concept of purity is largely implicit rather than something Indians frequently discuss and debate. Such a conception of dirt and purity is strange to Americans for whom cleanliness has long been next to godliness. And not only is

cleanliness a sacred value in American society; like salvation it is in principle available to all who truly seek it. Just as everyone who has faith can be saved, so all who "really want to" can be clean. For Americans, cleanliness is an infinitely expansible resource, and dirt is something that can be eliminated. Ironically, this optimistic notion of cleanliness may be what seems strange and peculiar to future generations. As we have increasingly been confronted by the problems of litter, contaminated water, nuclear waste which will be dangerous for thousands of years, and an unemployable underclass that seems largely impervious to either liberal or conservative strategies of development, the infinite expansibility of cleanliness seems more and more problematic. At the very least it appears that some of the things many people seem to want—more automobiles, fast food, disposable containers, and more energy—will have to be limited and regulated if we are not to be awash in our own garbage. Hence, if the Indian concept of purity as a limited resource seems strange to us, it is no more inherently illogical than the optimistic American illusion that our ability to create order and cleanliness is virtually unlimited.

While this notion of cleanliness as an inexpansible resource is primarily relevant to the purity and impurity of the social groups which make up the caste system in India, it is implicitly carried over into attitudes about the physical world. Much of the physical space in India is ordered in terms of its relative religious purity and impurity. The rooms of every orthodox Hindu house are ranked in terms of their relative purity and hence accessibility to outsiders. Purest of all is the kitchen area (usually including the space for household gods) where food is prepared. A primary source of a family's purity or impurity is the cooked food they eat. The more concerned a family is with religious purity, the more elaborate and rigorous will be the rules for preparation and serving of food. Similarly the more restrictive they will be about who can partake food in this area.

At the opposite extreme are the toilet facilities. Areas that

are associated with human excrement are for the orthodox Hindu inherently polluting. No matter how scientifically sanitary a toilet might be, to enter such a facility—and certainly to use it—lowers one's purity. Purity can be fully restored only by a complete bath and a clean set of clothes. This does not mean that the purity of the toilet area does not vary; the area must be purified regularly so as to minimize the polluting effect that using it involves. Moreover, for the orthodox upper caste someone else must clean it; their purity can be maintained only if such work is carried out by others who absorb the pollution that is inherent in the task. Since cleaning of toilet facilities is considered inherently degrading, it is left to the lowest and most deprived strata of society, who understandably are not always enthusiastic about their work. Moreover, since even supervising this task too closely contaminates one, the work often tends to be done in a rather perfunctory manner. Other rooms have an intermediate level of purity. The veranda or court yard is purer than the toilet area but still has a tendency to be polluted because of its openness to outsiders. Living and storage rooms will rank in between the public areas and the kitchen.

It is, at least for traditional orthodoxy, conceptually impossible to keep everything clean. The very process of day-to-day life involves biological functions and social contacts that are inherently polluting. The best that one can hope for is to maintain a relative purity. This purity is relative in two senses. First, as I have already indicated, it is relative to others; the greatest achievement possible in this world is to live a life that is purer than others. Second, purity is relative in time and space. Since pollution is inevitable the most one can do is to keep certain spaces, e.g., the kitchen, and certain times, e.g., just before meals, as pure as possible. Accordingly, one becomes resigned to the relative impurity of certain spaces and times.

This sense that dirt and pollution are inevitable for some times and locations becomes linked to the idea that if some are to be pure others must be impure. The result is a high

level of preoccupation with the cleanliness of one's body and personal space and a high degree of resignation about the dirtiness of public places. If cleanliness involves primarily the redistribution of dirt rather than its elimination, it is not surprising that many of the efforts at cleaning involve moving dirt from private to public areas. The Hindu merchant who may be fastidious about the cleanliness of his kitchen, food, clothes, and bathing area may ignore the questionable sanitation of his toilet, and he may seem indifferent to the stench created by the raw sewage that his toilet discharges into the open drainage ditch outside his home. The same merchant may keep his shop neat, orderly, and clean but do this by having the dirt and trash swept out onto the street. While he would be annoyed, if not outraged, if someone fouled his property with urine or excrement, he might urinate on the outside wall of someone else's place of business or in an alley or public park without giving the matter much thought.

In summary then, since cleanliness is conceptionalized in India as relatively inexpansible, a certain amount of dirt and impurity is inevitable; this leads to a strategy which focuses on redistributing rather than eliminating dirt; this in turn produces a preoccupation with the cleanliness of private rather than public areas.

IV

In the contemporary period a society which attempts to order all aspects of human life—or more accurately an unusually wide array of such aspects—is referred to as totalitarian. Not only are such societies seen as oppressive; they are, from a Western capitalist perspective, considered inefficient because they try to order too much. This raises the question of whether there are limits to what a society can successfully hope to order. Conversely, if there are attempts to order many areas of life, should we expect that some of these attempts will be much more halfhearted and less successful? This question suggests a fourth possible source of India's dirti-

ness: so much attention is devoted to religious and ritual order and cleanliness that other types of cleanliness are neglected. I have saved this argument for last because it is at best speculative. We do not know the limits on how much a society can successfully organize. Nor can it be demonstrated that the dirtiness that Westerners perceive in India results from concentrating efforts of control in other areas. Yet even one with a limited knowledge of traditional Indian society cannot but be impressed with the extensiveness of the rules and rituals concerning notions of religious purity and how virtually everyone is affected by these ideas. As David Mandelbaum notes in *Society in India*:

> Every person thus must go through a cycle of impairment and restoration both regularly and sporadically. Bodily excretion imposes a daily cycle; other biological facts—of sex, of menstruation, of cutaneous growth, of birth, of death—entail recurrent disability and require periodic restitution. When a person is brushed by death or birth of a close kinsman, the experience charges him with ritual disability, which must be discharged by the appropriate ritual acts. There are, to be sure, great differences in the purification practices of different *jatis* [castes]. But virtually all villages, rich and poor, high and low, lackadaisical as well as orthodox, observe some such biologically induced and ritually required purification.

It is hardly surprising that in a society where so many invest so much time and energy combating religiously conceived pollution more mundane forms of cleanliness receive less attention.

Besides the substantial energies devoted to religious concepts of purity, there may be another reason for India's physical dirtiness. I refer to the more relaxed Indian attitude regarding some areas of behavior. Perhaps the simplest example concerns noise. Compared to Westerners, Indians seem to be willing and able to tolerate high levels of noise. Part of this is due to population density; people live close together and they have had to learn to live with the sounds made by others. Yet it seems unlikely that this tolerance of noise is solely related to population density since the same

basic norms seem to apply in less densely populated areas. Audience behavior is one of the places where this is most obvious. To a much greater degree than American audiences, Indians enter and exit in the middle of a performance—whether it is a lecture, a political speech, a drama, or music. Frequently they are not particularly discreet or quiet about doing so. Similarly audio technicians feel little reluctance to adjust a microphone or move some piece of equipment in the middle of a performance. Servants may enter in the middle of a speech and noisily distribute cups of tea or refreshments. Members of the audience may chat with one another with only a minimal concern about not disturbing those around them. What is particularly striking about noise pollution is how often those of higher status tolerate the noise and disturbance created by those of lower status. An urban Brahman who would be outraged if an untouchable entered his house or compound may tolerate untouchable sweepers regularly creating noise that disturbs his sleep. The significance of these observations is that Indians seem relatively unconcerned about ordering—and "keeping clean"—certain areas of their lives about which Americans have much more extensive and rigorous social norms. Noise pollution in both East and West has little if anything to do with germ theories of disease or sanitation. My hypothesis is that the tolerance of it in India is due, in part, to the concentration of energies on controlling other kinds of pollution—more specificially ritual pollution. More generally I would suggest a fourth source for what the Westerner perceives as India's dirtiness: the energies and resources available for cleanliness—in the most general sense of keeping things well ordered—are concentrated on maintaining ritual purity rather than sanitation in the Western sense.

Still, while the link between Indian ritual purity and dirt is undeniable, there are other reasons for India's dirtiness having to do with practical difficulties rather than with cultural differences. Although India has the most democratic political structure of any large Third World country, the

governmental apparatus is highly cumbersome and often not very responsive to the needs and wishes of people at the local level. Thus the Hindu merchant may tolerate an open sewer outside of his home because he cannot get municipal officials to do anything about it. The municipal authorities in turn may face overwhelming practical problems due to high population, lack of resources, and other more urgent problems. Even if someone could wave a wand and make Indian concepts of dirt exactly like those of Americans, India would continue to be a dirty place for a long time to come. The dirtiness that is perceived by foreigners is due to a complicated combination of both cultural differences and practical difficulties. Second, the description of "traditional" notions of pollution and purity that I have given greatly simplifies the old realities, not to speak of the new. It is in some respects analogous to the historical information provided in guide books for tourists: it is useful for the first-time visitor, but the actual reality is necessarily condensed and simplified. Third, it would be completely misleading to imply that the notions of dirt and pollution that I have described are unquestioningly held by all Indians. Even in premodern India some groups, e.g., Muslims, were less committed to and less affected by the notions I have described.

In contemporary India education has an important effect upon notions of pollution. While the average level of education in India is not high by international standards, the elite of the country—which number in the millions—are well educated and highly sophisticated. Moreover, modern theories of disease and its implications for cleanliness are understood—with varying degrees of sophistication—by most of the population. My description of traditional concepts of pollution is not meant to imply that Indians are ignorant yokels who need to learn about Western notions of cleanliness. Rather the point is that Western concepts of cleanliness interact with and are modified by more traditional notions, and this is what we should expect when "a great tradition modernizes"—to use the title of Milton Singer's important

study of India. The enormous social transformation that India—with its rich and complex civilization more than 3,000 years old—is undergoing involves not merely copying the West but transforming itself in ways that in some respects may make it quite different from Western societies.

The focus of this essay has been on dirt because I believe it is one of the causes—perhaps the principal cause—of Western tourists' misunderstanding of India. They thus may overlook the very real and important change and development now taking place in the subcontinent. In the future, India may well be one of the most prominent and powerful societies in the world. A failure to grasp this possibility because of a limited and provincial understanding of dirt would indeed be tragic.