



India's Civic Deficit: Bridging the Gap Between Civic Sense and Civic Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

India faces a persistent civic deficit reflected in weak civic sense, low compliance with public norms, and a structural imbalance between rights and duties. Although ancient Indian traditions emphasized collective responsibility, colonial legacies, institutional weaknesses, and growing socioeconomic disparities have eroded civic culture. This study employs qualitative content analysis using historical texts, constitutional provisions, judicial interpretations, comparative international case studies, and interdisciplinary scholarly literature. Thematic coding is used to analyze the socio-legal, political, and educational roots of India's civic deficit. Findings reveal that India's civic deficit stems from interconnected structural factors: weak enforcement of laws, lack of experiential civic education, limited trust in institutions, political interference, and socioeconomic inequality. Comparative insights from Japan, Nordic countries, Singapore, and Brazil demonstrate that civic sense improves when experiential education, strong institutional integrity, and participatory governance coexist. Addressing India's civic deficit requires systemic reforms: reorienting civic education toward experiential learning, strengthening judicial independence, enforcing rules consistently, expanding participatory mechanisms, and promoting community-level ownership. Comparative models show that long-term cultural change requires both structural reforms and citizen-centered engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is conventionally characterized by its institutional foundations—parliaments, elections, constitutions, and judiciaries—which form the core elements emphasized in civic education. Yet a more understated but equally vital dimension emerges in the everyday behaviors of individuals when no one is watching. These unobserved actions, often referred to as "civic sense," reveal a deeper integration of civic responsibility into the social fabric, reflecting how citizens uphold communal well-being through voluntary adherence to norms (Rice, 2024). This includes an understanding of rights and obligations, alongside a

commitment to critical and rational engagement with civic issues (Kurniawan et al., 2025). In many Asian nations, the philosophical underpinnings of citizenship lean toward a communitarian perspective, emphasizing duties and adherence to societal norms over individualistic rights (Fahmi et al., 2024).

Routine practices illustrate this vividly: obeying traffic signals, properly disposing of refuse instead of littering streets, or refraining from defacing public transport. These actions transcend personal conduct, embodying core tenets of citizenship. In isolation, they may seem trivial, but collectively, they shape the fabric of communal life and maintain social order within a democratic framework (Menski, 2016). A deficiency in these behaviors—often termed "civic deficit"—manifests as widespread disregard for public norms, fostering systemic challenges like corruption and declining societal well-being (Gandhi, 2013; Yusoff et al., 2023). In India, this deficit is particularly acute, as the assertion of rights often overshadows duties, compounded by historical factors and an education system that has sometimes prioritized obedience over critical engagement (Kadiwal et al., 2022).

Civic sense thus rests on the deeper ethos of civic responsibility. Though seemingly mundane, it enables millions of unrelated individuals to coexist harmoniously in shared urban spaces, transport systems, markets, and public institutions—averting anarchy. Civic sense appears in observable routines, while civic responsibility supplies the underlying moral and constitutional imperative to prioritize collective welfare over self-interest. This encompasses civic disposition, cultivating private virtues like self-discipline and public virtues such as community engagement—both essential for responsible citizenship (Subaiah et al., 2024). Integrating individual conduct with collective welfare reveals a nuanced citizenship that extends beyond legal adherence to a profound moral and social contract (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This linkage between societal participation and moral development positions social responsibility as a multidimensional construct, embodying an orientation toward others as a personal value (Killen & Smetana, 2006).

In contemporary India, however, this vital link remains fragile. Rights are asserted vociferously, while duties receive scant attention. The Constitution enshrines rights robustly in Part III, but Fundamental Duties—added via the 42nd Amendment in 1976 under Article 51A—are invoked sporadically with minimal behavioral impact. Awareness of rights is widespread, yet fewer citizens proactively fulfill obligations. This imbalance appears in chaotic traffic, polluted public spaces, and lax environmental compliance—symptoms of systemic disequilibrium. Some argue that rights violations erode civic responsibility, as individuals blame the state for hardships and reciprocate by neglecting duties (Ronconi, 2019). This lacuna underscores how an overemphasis on individual rights has overshadowed collective responsibilities vital to democracy (Mitra et al., 2019). Socioeconomic disparities compound the erosion, with exclusion from basic rights fostering disengagement—from tax evasion to political clientelism (Ronconi, 2019).

Scholarly analyses reinforce this. Kamraju contends that governmental legitimacy erodes amid citizen irresponsibility, rendering even well-crafted laws ineffective without voluntary compliance (Schuck, 1992). Menon, Hartz-Karp, and Marinova similarly attribute participatory governance failures in Indian municipalities to citizens' deficient habits, interpersonal trust, and sustained engagement skills—implicating citizens as much as structures (Rao et al., 2017). This underscores the need for renewed civic education to cultivate ethical responsibility and social justice as core democratic elements (Glowrey et al., 2023). Despite constitutional recognition of duties, their practical implementation and cultural embedding pose substantial challenges to a balanced civic ethos in India (Mitra et al., 2019).

Article 51A exemplifies this, mandating citizens to protect and improve the natural environment in alignment with sustainable development principles (Huang, 2020; Menski, 2016).

India's historical legacy remarkably emphasized duty. Ancient texts like the Arthashastra outlined reciprocal ruler-subject obligations; Dharmaśāstras linked personal ethics to societal harmony; Buddhism and Jainism elevated compassion and non-violence as communal imperatives. Pre-colonial village panchayats embodied collective accountability (Awasthi et al., 2025). This tradition persisted in the independence struggle, where Gandhi's swaraj fused political autonomy with self-discipline, restraint, and public service—making freedom and duty inseparable. Yet despite this heritage prioritizing duty, modern India struggles to translate it into civic action, hindered by a focus on individual rights and limited familiarity with responsibilities—especially in underdeveloped nations (Torkashvand & Darabi, 2023).

Given this foundation, a robust civic ethos might be anticipated, yet reality disappoints. Colonial legacies partly explain it: British rule promoted obedience without participation, delegating responsibilities to the state. This "deference to authority" lingered post-1947, framing street maintenance, heritage preservation, and environmental stewardship as governmental duties (Murphy et al., 2019). Taguchi's comparative research shows how internalized responsibility yields better civic outcomes, unlike mindsets viewing public realms as "others' concerns"—prevalent in India (Routh et al., 2025). The 42nd Amendment further enshrined "compassion for living creatures" as a duty, reinforcing shared environmental stewardship (Tarabout, 2019; Verma, 2021). Yet India faces severe sustainability challenges, with its 2017 ecological footprint exceeding biocapacity by 177% (Akadiri et al., 2022).

This paradox—noble ideals undermined by practice—not only frustrates but imperils democracy. Prioritizing rights over duties destabilizes the polity, weakening laws, undermining policies, and rendering public life precarious. It hinders progress and sustainable development, as collective civic commitment is crucial for tackling climate change, poverty, and inequality (Dash, 2014). Individual psychological factors, like ecological burnout, intertwine with ethical spheres to shape engagement (Qiu & Qiu, 2024). Addressing it demands transcending blame to foster ecological citizenship, blending environmental rights with sustainability commitments (Pathak & Nichter, 2021).

This analysis explores the civic deficit's roots through four questions: How have India's juridical and historical legacies shaped civic responsibility? What cultural and institutional barriers perpetuate suboptimal conduct? What lessons offer comparable societies? And what interventions can realize civic sense? The thesis holds that diminished civic sense stems from systemic shortcomings, not just individual failings. Reforms in education, law, governance, and culture are imperative; absent them, India's democracy risks becoming a constitutional shell veiling profound frailty.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method grounded in library-based and documentary analysis to explore the historical, socio-legal, and institutional roots of India's civic deficit. A qualitative design is considered the most appropriate because civic responsibility is a multidimensional construct shaped by legal traditions, cultural norms, governance practices, and comparative international experiences—elements that require deep

contextual interpretation rather than numerical measurement. The research draws upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, judicial interpretations, legal documents, government policy frameworks, scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and comparative case studies from countries such as Japan, the Nordic region, Singapore, and Brazil. These materials were gathered through systematic searches of academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and the UN Digital Library, using thematic keywords related to civic responsibility, governance, civic education, corruption, and participatory democracy.

Data collection proceeded through careful examination of these textual materials, with each document evaluated for conceptual relevance, theoretical contribution, and empirical insight into the dynamics of civic culture. The data were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis, allowing the researcher to identify recurring patterns, thematic clusters, and structural relationships among factors influencing civic behavior in India. This was complemented by critical discourse analysis to examine how legal and political narratives have shaped public attitudes toward rights and duties. Comparative institutional analysis was also employed to synthesize lessons from international models and assess their applicability within the Indian context. Through this integrated qualitative approach, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, educational shortcomings, and governance challenges collectively shape India's contemporary civic deficit.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical and Socio-Legal Framework

1. Pre-Colonial and Ancient Foundations of Civic Responsibility in India

The idea of civic duty is very old in India. It did not begin with the Constitution. Anyone who has ever read the Arthashastra would know that both the rulers and the people had their own duties to discharge. Kautilya wrote about keeping things in order but also about how people needed to appease each other in order to keep the kingdom running. The Dharmaśāstras went a step further and said that people's everyday behaviour had consequences for the common good of society (Sihag, 2017). Religion conveyed the idea too. Buddhism preached compassion, and Jainism preached ahimsa and self-control. Village panchayats settled conflicts and administered local affairs. They were not perfect—hierarchy mattered—but there was still some perception of people feeling a sense of responsibility towards society.

This historical context illustrates that the concept of social responsibility is a multidimensional construct deeply rooted in moral development and an orientation toward collective well-being, rather than solely individualistic pursuits (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This historical precedent suggests that fostering a robust civic ethos in contemporary India necessitates a re-evaluation of educational and policy frameworks to emphasize collective action and reciprocal obligations (Moshood et al., 2024; Qiu & Qiu, 2024). Indeed, modern interpretations of corporate social responsibility in India, particularly concerning environmental protection, reflect an evolution from ancient principles of duty towards more formalized legal and ethical frameworks (M et al., 2022). Despite these historical underpinnings, the practical manifestation of civic responsibility remains challenged by a disconnect between constitutional mandates and effective citizen engagement, as evidenced by persistent issues such as low voter turnout (Godara, 2024; Kapoor et al., 2023). This

disjunction underscores the critical need for educational strategies designed to cultivate a profound sense of social responsibility from an early age, thereby strengthening the societal fabric and fostering genuine innovation (Dominici, 2022; Killen & Smetana, 2006).

Such pedagogical approaches should integrate lessons from ancient Indian philosophy, wherein concepts like dharma underscore the intrinsic link between individual conduct and societal welfare, providing a cultural bedrock for contemporary civic engagement (N & Nayak, 2023; Tomar & Seth, 2025). The integration of these philosophical principles within modern educational curricula can foster a deeper understanding of ethical responsibility, prompting individuals to recognize their roles in upholding justice and equity for others (Glowrey et al., 2023). This nuanced understanding can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, motivating active participation in civic life and ethical decision-making. Moreover, by emphasizing the interdependence of individual actions and collective outcomes, education can cultivate a sense of ecological citizenship essential for addressing pressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable development (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This approach can instill values such as cultural awareness, empathy, and a spirit of service, transforming individual ethics into a collective force for societal betterment (America, n.d.; Killen & Smetana, 2006).

2. Colonial Interference and the Erosion of Civic Culture

The advent of colonial rule systematically dismantled these indigenous structures of civic responsibility, replacing them with an administrative apparatus that emphasized passive obedience to external authority rather than active, participatory citizenship. This shift alienated individuals from their communal obligations, fostering a mentality of detachment from public affairs and diminishing the intrinsic motivation for social contribution that characterized pre-colonial systems (Sartika et al., 2024). The imposed hierarchical governance, focused on resource extraction and control, supplanted local self-governance and communal decision-making processes, thereby eroding the organic development of civic virtues such as cooperation and shared responsibility (Kurniawan et al., 2025). The imposition of foreign legal systems and administrative practices further distanced the populace from legal ownership and participation, fostering a perception of law as an external, often oppressive, force rather than an instrument of collective well-being and justice.

This disruption fundamentally altered the relationship between the individual and the state, replacing a community-centric model of civic engagement with one characterized by disempowerment and political apathy (Merlain-Moffatt, 2024). This erosion of civic culture during the colonial period has had lasting repercussions, contributing to a modern context where educational efforts must actively strive to rebuild a foundational sense of civic duty and environmental consciousness (Fahmi et al., 2024). Indeed, scholarly work suggests that this colonial legacy is responsible for the continued prevalence of educational systems that overlook broad-based ethical issues, contributing to a lack of civic engagement and environmental civility (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020; Melissen et al., 2017). Therefore, universities, in particular, face the imperative of designing curricula that not only impart specialized knowledge but also cultivate a robust ethical preparedness among students, fostering a commitment to societal well-being and sustainable practices (Bardy et al., 2018; Bihu & Ngeiyamu, 2023). This includes addressing the "two publics" phenomenon, where a disconnect exists between the individual's primordial public (rooted in ethnic and personal ties) and the civic public (associated with the formal state), a concept profoundly shaped by the historical experiences of colonialism in Africa (Jakobson et al., 2020).

This bifurcation between urban elites governed by the colonial state and rural populations subject to traditional authorities, a legacy of colonial rule, continues to shape postcolonial civic life by creating persistent divisions between citizens of the modern state and subjects of more traditional forms of authority (Adebanwi, 2016; Tikly, 2019). The enduring impact of these historical trajectories necessitates a re-evaluation of post-colonial governance structures and their role in fostering inclusive civic participation and environmental stewardship (Ndulo, 2003). This historical context highlights the challenges in establishing effective public administration systems in many African nations, where imported models often struggle to integrate with existing socio-cultural frameworks, leading to issues of ineffectiveness and poor performance (Jakobson et al., 2020).

3. The Constitutional Vision in the Post-Independence Era

Post-independence constitutional frameworks prioritized fundamental rights, with fundamental duties introduced later in 1976 under Article 51A. Comprising eleven duties, these provisions are rarely recalled by citizens. Unlike enforceable rights, duties lack legal compulsion, creating a profound imbalance. Courts have endeavored to highlight obligations—for instance, in *AIIMS Students' Union v. AIIMS*, the Supreme Court emphasized that democracy falters without citizens upholding their duties. Yet, absent enforcement, such obligations remain largely symbolic (Rajagopal, 2007).

This systemic imbalance highlights the urgent need for legislative and judicial reforms to render civic duties tangible and actionable, thereby nurturing a more engaged citizenry. Moreover, educational systems must reorient to embed civic responsibilities at their core, transcending rote learning to foster genuine motivation for participation. This requires evolving from a rights-dominated narrative to one affirming the reciprocity of rights and duties, essential for democratic vitality (Coggin, 2021). Such rebalancing holds particular salience in post-colonial settings, where legacies of "subjecthood" over "citizenship" have curtailed public involvement and rights assertion (Ohdedar, 2024). These dynamics perpetuate public administration challenges across many African nations, as imported models clash with socio-cultural realities, yielding inefficiency and underperformance (Jakobson et al., 2020).

The faltering of Western-inspired decentralization efforts exemplifies this, as they overlooked indigenous practices vital for sustainability (Erk, 2020), underscoring the imperative to contextualize governance structures (Jakobson et al., 2020). Compounding these issues, political accountability mechanisms like elections and civil society remain feeble due to institutional weaknesses, fostering instability and muted citizen response (Jakobson et al., 2020). High corruption rates further erode trust and destabilize systems (Yusoff et al., 2023). The institutionalization of political docility, often stemming from these entrenched weaknesses, remains a significant barrier to effective public accountability, reinforcing a cycle of governmental unresponsiveness and citizen disengagement (Mateng'e, 2023). Despite these challenges, the concept of civic duties continues to be viewed as essential for citizenship in many post-colonial nations, often incorporating values such as respecting national symbols and promoting social harmony (Mitra et al., 2019).

4. The Judiciary's Role in Fostering Civic Responsibility

The judiciary, therefore, has a critical role in interpreting and enforcing these duties, potentially transforming them from mere exhortations into actionable principles that guide citizen behavior and governmental accountability. This active judicial role is particularly

crucial in contexts where the rule of law is still developing, as robust judicial interpretation can bridge the gap between aspirational constitutional principles and practical civic engagement (Akech, 2013). This necessitates a re-examination of judicial review mechanisms to empower courts to adjudicate on matters pertaining to civic responsibilities, thereby ensuring these duties are not merely declarative but operative components of the legal framework. This judicial activism, however, must be carefully balanced to avoid overreach, ensuring that the enforcement of civic duties aligns with democratic principles and avoids infringing upon individual liberties.

Furthermore, the efficacy of judicial intervention is contingent upon robust public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives, ensuring that citizens comprehend their duties and the implications of judicial pronouncements. Only through such integrated approaches, encompassing legislative reform, educational reorientation, and judicious judicial activism, can post-colonial states effectively transition from legacies of passive subjecthood to active, responsible citizenship, thereby strengthening democratic governance and public accountability (Rhamadhani & Edeh, 2024). This transition is especially vital in nations where historical patterns of patrimonialism and one-party rule have hindered the institutionalization of accountability mechanisms and fostered a culture of deference rather than active civic participation (JPL, 2008; Odinkalu, 2021). However, in many African nations, citizen and civil society integration in performance management and accountability of political officials remains weakly institutionalized, limiting effective control over politicians (Jakobson et al., 2020).

However, the judiciary, deriving its power from the populace, is constitutionally mandated to ensure justice and uphold civic obligations, including promoting democracy and the rule of law (Kaalund, 2023). This mandate underscores the judiciary's role as a critical safeguard against arbitrary exercise of power, ensuring governmental adherence to legal and constitutional standards (Akech, 2013). Indeed, judicial integrity is paramount, as it encompasses not only judges but all actors within the administration of justice system, including enforcement officers, prosecutors, and lawyers, thereby ensuring accountability across the entire spectrum (Mat, 2023). This includes preventing the executive from undermining the independence of judges and promoting a culture of accountability where judicial officers who undermine the rule of law face appropriate sanctions (Ndhlovu, 2015). Furthermore, effective judicial systems require proactive and meticulous judges who are committed to upholding the rule of law and ensuring that all state organs operate within their constitutional mandates (Abdulrauf, 2018).

5. Civic Culture in Contemporary India: Oscillating Between Apathy and Engagement

This dynamic is evident in how certain social movements in India have leveraged the judiciary to advance accountability, highlighting a tension between traditional deference and burgeoning demands for justice (JPL, 2008). This reflects a broader societal shift where the judiciary is increasingly seen as a crucial avenue for redress, particularly when other governmental branches fail to uphold their responsibilities (Mat, 2023; Tuovinen et al., 2021). This reliance on judicial intervention underscores a growing public trust in the courts to enforce accountability and uphold constitutional principles, especially in regions where traditional mechanisms of oversight have faltered (Miyandazi, 2025). This increased judicial involvement necessitates robust mechanisms for judicial accountability to maintain public legitimacy and prevent overreach (Akech, 2011; Piana, 2009).

Consequently, scholars have noted that a constant experience shows that those in power tend to abuse it until confronted with limits (Markam, 2018). This underscores the necessity for independent institutions, like a robust judiciary, to serve as a check on executive and legislative authority, preventing the erosion of democratic norms and ensuring governance remains accountable to the citizenry. This judicial oversight extends beyond constitutional amendments to encompass various forms of state action, including the use of emergency powers and denials of secular values, emphasizing its pervasive influence on federal adjudication (Razai, 2018). This also highlights the judiciary's responsibility in maintaining consistency in its rulings, as inconsistencies in legal arguments could tarnish its integrity and public trust (Mat, 2023). To mitigate this, judicial selection processes must prioritize candidates who demonstrate an unwavering commitment to constitutional ideals such as justice, equality, liberty, dignity, and the principles of democracy and secularism (Pillay, 2017).

This rigorous selection process is vital for upholding the rule of law, which ensures that these constitutional principles find expression in the everyday lives of citizens, promoting justice, equality, and liberty (Arora, 2021). However, ensuring the independence of the judiciary from political interference is crucial for it to effectively fulfill its role in upholding these principles, especially in states where the autonomy of lower courts remains problematic (Razai, 2018). Without judicial independence, there is a risk of judicial tyranny, necessitating oversight to ensure judges' impartiality and accountability (Mendy, 2023). Furthermore, political interference, through mechanisms like judicial appointments or intimidation, directly threatens this independence, eroding the judiciary's capacity to act as a check on executive power and uphold the constitution (Mat, 2023).

Current Challenges in Cultivating Civic Consciousness in India

Despite judicial activism and constitutional conventions in India, civic responsibility is in grave danger. These are not discrete problems; they are institutional, cultural, and structural problems that intersect with each other in complex ways. For instance, the pervasive influence of political interference, particularly in judicial appointments and through intimidation tactics, poses a significant threat to the judiciary's independence and its capacity to uphold constitutional integrity (Mat, 2023).

1. Urbanization and Civic Stress

Such interference often manifests through executive actions that disregard judicial processes, thereby undermining the foundational principles of the Federal Constitution and the separation of powers (Mat, 2023). Consequently, it is imperative for all branches of government—the executive, legislative, and judicial—to adhere strictly to their oaths of office, preserving and defending the constitutional framework (Mat, 2023). Moreover, the judiciary's proactive role, often termed judicial activism, has been instrumental in shaping India's constitutional law by interpreting the Constitution in line with societal changes, expanding fundamental rights, and addressing critical issues such as environmental protection and social justice (Devi, 2024). While this expansive interpretation is crucial for societal progress, it can sometimes lead to accusations of judicial overreach, creating tension with the legislative and executive branches over policy formulation (Berti & Tarabout, 2018).

This dynamic necessitates a delicate balance: the judiciary must navigate its activist role without encroaching upon the democratic mandates of elected bodies, even as political interference threatens to undermine its autonomy and effectiveness (Mat, 2023). For example,

the Prime Minister holds significant power in appointing judges, and instances of executive statements disregarding judicial decisions indicate a blatant disregard for judicial processes and the Federal Constitution (Mat, 2023). Such actions highlight the ongoing struggle to maintain judicial integrity and independence against external pressures, which are essential for the proper functioning of a democratic state (Mat, 2023). This tension is further exacerbated by the substantial backlog of over 31 million cases within India's judicial system, with a significant portion pending for a decade or more, severely limiting the effective exercise of judicial oversight.

2. Exclusion and Inequality

Socioeconomic disparities profoundly influence civic consciousness in India, where access to sanitary public spaces, cleanliness, and safe restrooms remains largely location- and class-dependent. In peripheral communities, survival needs take precedence over civic virtues like consideration—not pursued for their own sake, but as essential survival mechanisms. These structural disparities hinder the practice of civic virtues across society at large. Moreover, disenfranchisement breeds disengagement: slum politics literature shows that citizens often view municipal institutions as tools of elite control rather than representative bodies. This fosters a cycle of civic disengagement, entrenching inequalities and obstructing cohesive civic consciousness (Cordery et al., 2022).

Furthermore, feelings of solidarity and community engagement are strongly tied to social responsibility and civic action, emphasizing the need for inclusive community-building initiatives (Killen & Smetana, 2006). Yet civic consciousness scholarship stresses that solidarity alone falls short; it must be complemented by critical reflection and opportunities for action to build efficacy and motivation (Killen & Smetana, 2006). Robust institutions are thus vital, offering pathways for reflection and participation to tackle injustices (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This reflection-action dynamic is key, enabling critical analysis of the collective good and civic duty in resisting injustice. When formal institutions falter, such resistance often emerges through extralegal settlements, revealing a nuanced legal consciousness adapted to systemic gaps (Roychowdhury, 2019). For instance, urban slum dwellers endure acute shortages in water, sanitation, and health services, underscoring how governance failures curtail marginalized groups' civic participation and justice access (Chidambaram, 2021).

3. Inadequate Enforcement of Legal Provisions

Laws maintain civic order, but Indian enforcement is spasmodic. Traffic laws are consistently broken, waste management laws are spottily being enforced, and vandalism of public property is frequently penalty-free. Though the judiciary enforces compliance, enforcement in the absence of support from the administration is symbolic. In many instances, the economically disadvantaged are often unaware of governmental regulations concerning waste management and environmental policies, leading to unintentional non-compliance (Koot, 2020). This lack of awareness is compounded by a broader societal issue where political pressure can render criminal justice institutions ineffective in delivering rights, leading citizens to develop new normative commitments even while violating established laws (Roychowdhury, 2019). This highlights the need for robust civic education programs that target all socioeconomic strata, coupled with transparent and consistent enforcement mechanisms, to foster a culture of compliance and civic responsibility (Sundar, 2024).

Such educational initiatives should aim to cultivate critical consciousness, empowering citizens to recognize and challenge oppressive systems, thereby fostering a more engaged and proactive citizenry (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020). However, the persistent limitations in treatment

and disposal facilities, coupled with insufficient source segregation and collection inefficiencies, continue to undermine effective waste management practices across India (Rajput & Singh, 2024). This issue is further exacerbated by weak legal frameworks, the inability of law enforcement to perform their duties effectively, and pervasive corruption, collusion, and nepotism, which collectively hinder the proper implementation and enforcement of environmental regulations (Anggraeni & Amrullah, 2023). A thorough and well-organized institutional system is therefore essential to effectively implement and enforce environmental regulations, ensuring that all societal segments, particularly the marginalized, are not inadvertently penalized due to lack of awareness or systemic failures (Zhen et al., 2024).

4. Failures in Governance and Corruption

Moreover, political corruption often results in overpriced services and misaligned incentives between regional operators and citizens, fostering exploitation in waste management systems (Jakobson et al., 2020). This dysfunction is worsened by insufficient enforcement of regulations and unclear stakeholder responsibilities, which frequently cause policies to miss their targets (Chauhan et al., 2022). Tackling corruption is thus essential to rebuild public trust in environmental governance, particularly as socioeconomic pressures often eclipse environmental priorities (Ologunagba et al., 2025). Compounding these problems, the lack of robust data for planning, monitoring, and evaluation—along with limited funds for ethnographic research—severely impedes waste management productivity (Resolute, 2024). This data gap, highlighted by the missing "polluter pays" principle and revenue mechanisms for environmental damage, fuels financial woes and erodes sustainable practices.

The absence of a single, accountable agency to coordinate operations further fragments policies and undermines effectiveness (Pant, 2013). Global comparisons reveal that even nations with targeted strategies grapple with technical and market incentive challenges, exposing broader governance flaws (Siddeshwar, 2025). Decentralized systems often devolve into bureaucratic mazes with overlapping duties and poor implementation, hindering regional waste management (Resolute, 2024). Local administrations, hampered by weak taxation, struggle financially—though user charges could help, limited willingness and ability to pay constrain this in developing countries (Pant, 2013). Ultimately, institutional frailties, funding shortfalls, poor cost recovery, and vague roles signal a profound governance crisis beyond mere attitudes (Kocasoy, 2015).

Youth, Civic Education, and the Cultivation of Civic Values

The following section will explore how investing in youth development and civic education programs can foster a more engaged and responsible citizenry, particularly concerning environmental stewardship and sustainable waste management practices. Such initiatives are crucial for cultivating a sense of civic duty and political interest among young people, thereby increasing their likelihood of participating in public life and perceiving their actions as impactful (Salsabila et al., 2023). Research suggests that many young people struggle to define fundamental concepts such as integrity and often fail to recognize corrupt acts, indicating a critical need for enhanced civic education to improve their understanding of governance and its relevance to their lives (Bergin et al., 2024).

Education is likely to be among the forces of civic consciousness. Civic education instructs youth in the knowledge, competencies, and values needed to engage in a democratic system. Indian civic education, though, is fragmented and textbook-driven and not

experiential. This pedagogical approach often fails to cultivate a deep understanding of civic responsibility and practical engagement, instead promoting rote memorization over critical thinking and active participation (Salsabila et al., 2023).

1. School and University-Based Citizenship Education

The National Curriculum Framework of 2005 emphasises values of responsibility, social justice, and tolerance but unevenly. Students memorise provisions of the constitution but are unaware of how to use these in everyday life. The Civic Education Report acknowledges that participatory approaches—service learning, community projects, debates, and mock parliaments—are far more effective. Students are more accountable by addressing actual civic issues. This experiential learning can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, fostering a more profound sense of ownership and civic engagement (Sewak et al., 2021). This approach not only enhances their understanding of democratic processes but also encourages active participation in resolving community challenges, such as waste management issues (Santhya et al., 2017; Taff et al., 2021). By actively involving youth in problem-solving related to their immediate environment, civic education can transform abstract concepts into tangible actions, promoting a generation of informed and proactive citizens (Maulana & Milanti, 2023; Taff et al., 2021).

Universities can do better too. The National Service Scheme (NSS) and National Cadet Corps (NCC) programmes try to instil the civic sense, but they are available only to a section of society. They could promote them more so that a generation is better attuned to the nitty-gritty of democracy. Moreover, a robust civic education curriculum can equip young people with the critical thinking skills necessary to scrutinize authority and hold bureaucrats accountable, thereby serving as a deterrent to corruption and promoting transparency in governance (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021). This emphasis on critical engagement can empower youth to identify and challenge instances of maladministration, fostering a more ethical public service (Kadiwal et al., 2022). Furthermore, integrating anti-corruption education from an early age is crucial, as young people are often unaware of what constitutes corruption or its relevance to their lives (Bergin et al., 2024).

2. Youth and Civic Engagement

Studies consistently demonstrate that providing young individuals with comprehensive education on corruption and its detrimental effects can significantly reduce their susceptibility to engaging in corrupt practices (Bergin et al., 2024). Moreover, incorporating value-based education, as pioneered by initiatives like UNODC's Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment, can cultivate a strong ethical foundation from primary school onwards, leveraging indigenous philosophies for contextual relevance (Bergin et al., 2024). This approach, which can involve integrating anti-corruption themes into various subjects and encouraging active participation in community-based initiatives, prepares young people to become resilient against corruption and advocates for democratic values (Bergin et al., 2024; Obiagu et al., 2023). Such educational frameworks equip youth with the capacity to discern and challenge corruption, fostering a generation committed to ethical governance (Bergin et al., 2024).

Indeed, strengthening educational programs on integrity and transparency from a young age is essential, as many young people currently lack a clear understanding of what constitutes integrity or corruption (Bergin et al., 2024). Consequently, implementing formal anti-corruption modules within school curricula and through extracurricular activities, such as integrity schools and youth fellowship programs, can effectively demystify these concepts

and promote ethical citizenship among young people (Bergin et al., 2024). These initiatives also aim to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility, enabling young individuals to become active participants in community oversight and policy monitoring, which are crucial for preventing corruption (Trisiana et al., 2024). For example, in Paraguay, the Youth Change Reaction organization actively engages students in anti-corruption efforts by raising awareness about corruption's manifestations and consequences within school settings, connecting them with governmental and non-governmental anti-corruption programs.

3. The Interdependence of Rights and Duties in Citizenship Education

This section explores how balancing an understanding of civic rights with a clear grasp of civic duties cultivates comprehensive and responsible citizenship, especially in efforts to combat corruption and promote sustainable environmental practices (Aksinudin et al., 2022). This integrated approach enables young people to see that democratic participation goes beyond personal entitlements to include collective obligations, nurturing a holistic view of their role in a just and equitable society (Bergin et al., 2024). By highlighting this duality, educational programs empower future generations to contribute actively to societal well-being, uphold democratic principles, and build resilience against malfeasance (Yusoff et al., 2023). For instance, democratic citizenship and human rights education foster responsible, active students who engage fully in school life, thereby strengthening trust in shared institutional norms and rules.

Such frameworks deepen appreciation for the rule of law and democratic principles, equipping students to critically assess governmental actions and advocate for transparency and accountability (Yusoff et al., 2023). They also cultivate social responsibility, helping students recognize how their actions support the collective good and prevent corruption (Yusoff et al., 2023). This engagement is essential for raising a generation that grasps the theory of civic duties and applies it practically to fight corruption and improve societal well-being (Yusoff et al., 2023). Moreover, integrating civic education in this way strengthens ties between environmental citizenship and ethics, sparking discussions on equity and responsibility in tackling environmental challenges (Hasrul & Irawan, 2023).

4. Civic Socialization through Digital Media

Digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for civic socialization, enabling young people to engage with political and social issues, voice their opinions, and mobilize for collective action in novel ways (Bergin et al., 2024). However, while digital engagement can enhance civic participation, it is crucial to recognize that disparities in digital literacy and access can exacerbate existing inequalities in political involvement, with those already politically active being more likely to engage online (Law & Atkinson, 2021). Therefore, educators must strategically integrate digital learning into civic education, leveraging interactive simulations and gamified experiences to bridge these gaps and promote broader participation across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Law & Atkinson, 2021). This integrative approach, incorporating digital tools and critical consciousness, is vital for a comprehensive understanding of youth civic engagement, particularly as young people increasingly use digital spaces to express their views and participate in social movements.

This necessitates a curriculum that not only teaches digital literacy but also critically examines the role of social media in shaping political discourse and civic action, ensuring young citizens are equipped to navigate complex online environments (Treviño et al., 2021). Furthermore, fostering critical consciousness among youth regarding structural inequalities, especially those highlighted by recent global events, is essential for enabling them to act as

informed civic actors (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This integrated approach, which considers the intersection of social identities and sociohistorical context, allows for a fuller understanding of youth perspectives and experiences as civic actors. Moreover, these digital platforms serve as significant avenues for youth-led activism, enabling young individuals to organize, share information, and foster critical consciousness without direct adult supervision, thereby cultivating a sense of agency and collective mobilization.

Comparative Perspectives on Civic Responsibility

A comparative examination of civic responsibility cultivation in other nations yields valuable insights applicable to India. Despite variations in cultural and institutional frameworks, such analyses identify transferable practices to guide reforms within the Indian context.

1. Japan: Fostering Cleanliness through Community Ownership

Japan's emphasis on collective responsibility and meticulous waste management, deeply embedded in its educational system and daily life, offers a model for instilling civic duty from an early age. Their comprehensive approach, integrating environmental education with practical community service, encourages a profound sense of ownership and accountability among citizens regarding public spaces and resources. This model demonstrates that civic responsibility can be effectively cultivated through an early, consistent, and integrated educational framework that prioritizes communal well-being and environmental stewardship. Such an approach goes beyond mere theoretical instruction, emphasizing hands-on participation and the development of a shared understanding of civic duties and environmental ethics (Felton et al., 2023). This collective ethos fosters a sense of agency, wherein individuals recognize their capacity to positively impact their communities and the environment through their actions (Killen & Smetana, 2006).

This model underscores the importance of embedding civic values into the lived experiences of children rather than presenting them solely as abstract concepts, thereby fostering a deep-seated commitment to social responsibility (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This is achieved by fostering opportunities for children to practice social responsibility through activities such as volunteering, which further strengthens prosocial behaviors and self-efficacy (Killen & Smetana, 2006). These practices instill a sense of moral development linked to participation in society, transforming civic education into a pathway for promoting both individual well-being and the common good (Killen & Smetana, 2006). This Japanese model, by integrating practical communal activities with theoretical understanding, provides a compelling blueprint for India to enhance its waste management and civic engagement initiatives (Koot, 2020). India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, for instance, shares conceptual similarities with Japan's approach in its aspiration for cleanliness, although the implementation strategies and cultural contexts differ significantly (Curtis, 2019).

For example, Japanese schools incorporate environmental education into their curriculum, focusing on waste management since 1971, which familiarizes students with societal systems like waste disposal (Hanashima, 2024). Moreover, Japanese students actively participate in daily school clean-ups, bringing their own cleaning supplies and maintaining cleanliness throughout the entire school, not just their classrooms (Mulyadi, 2020). This active involvement fosters a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for their environment, contributing to a deeply ingrained cultural practice of cleanliness that extends into adulthood and broader societal norms (Mulyadi, 2020). This practical, hands-on approach to environmental education and civic duty cultivates character through an ethos of shared

responsibility and modeling by senior students, demonstrating how societal values can be transmitted effectively across generations (Arthur, 2016).

2. Scandinavian Approaches: Institutional Trust and Regulatory Compliance

The Nordic countries, particularly Finland, exemplify a societal structure built upon high levels of social trust and robust regulatory frameworks, leading to exemplary civic responsibility and adherence to public norms. This environment fosters a strong sense of collective welfare, where citizens largely comply with regulations not merely out of obligation but from a shared understanding that such adherence benefits the entire community. This high degree of civic-mindedness is often attributed to comprehensive educational systems that prioritize ethical development and civic engagement from an early age, alongside transparent governance and equitable social policies that reinforce public trust (Sarkadi et al., 2022). Such an approach contrasts sharply with contexts where a lack of trust in institutions or perceived inequities can erode public adherence to civic duties, demonstrating that robust institutional frameworks are pivotal in fostering a culture of compliance and collective well-being (Ong & Sovacool, 2012).

This underscores the importance of a symbiotic relationship between institutional integrity and civic participation in cultivating a responsible citizenry, where mutual cooperation and civic dispositions are internalized as personal meaning (Kurniawan et al., 2025). The European educational paradigm, by encouraging participation in democratic processes and fostering diversity, nurtures a sense of collective accountability among students, leading to more inclusive and cohesive societies (Svyrydenko & Revin, 2023). These systems often integrate sustainable development and environmental education, equipping citizens with the tools to become active members of the global community and advocates for environmental preservation (Svyrydenko & Revin, 2023; Treviño et al., 2021). The Scandinavian model thereby offers India valuable insights into strengthening institutional trust and leveraging education to cultivate a citizenry deeply committed to societal norms and environmental stewardship.

One notable example is Denmark's integration of empathy training into its national curriculum, fostering social problem-solving and perspective-taking skills from a young age (Sultan & Khan, 2025). Similarly, Bhutan's "Gross National Happiness" framework incorporates compassion and emotional development into mainstream education, demonstrating a national prioritization of socio-emotional learning (Sultan & Khan, 2025). These initiatives highlight how national policies can deliberately cultivate social trust and well-being by emphasizing socio-emotional learning within educational frameworks (Sultan & Khan, 2025). The long-standing emphasis on group work over teacher-centric lectures in Nordic educational systems, especially post-1968 student movements, also significantly contributes to developing children's trust and cooperativeness, influencing civic responsibility (Andersen & Dinesen, 2017).

3. Deliberative Democracy in Urban Governance

Deliberative democracy, characterized by inclusive and reasoned public discourse, presents a compelling framework for enhancing urban governance, particularly in contexts marked by distrust in governmental processes and insufficient public involvement (Menon et al., 2021). This approach is particularly pertinent in India, where the complexities of urban development often lead to marginalized voices being excluded from decision-making, thereby hindering effective policy implementation and sustainable urban growth (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019). By actively engaging diverse stakeholders in a communicative process aimed at consensus-

building, deliberative democracy can bridge these gaps, fostering greater legitimacy and public buy-in for urban policies. This framework, emphasizing inclusive, egalitarian, informed, and well-structured democratic participation, offers a viable pathway to improve sustainability outcomes and address the inadequacies of current public participation efforts in Indian cities (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019; Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2020).

Such participatory mechanisms, including creative approaches like art, music, or games, can unite diverse community members, particularly children and teenagers, and build trust through shared endeavors (Kramer et al., 2024). This participatory model enhances policy legitimacy and responsiveness by allowing citizens to actively shape public discourse and outcomes, thereby fostering an environment of accountability and transparency in urban governance (Ariawan et al., 2025). This aligns with contemporary democratic governance goals, which increasingly value citizen engagement to improve policy effectiveness across varied socio-political and technological landscapes (Ariawan et al., 2025). This approach is critical for addressing the often-overlooked concerns of marginalized populations, ensuring that urban development initiatives are both equitable and effective (Ariawan et al., 2025).

4. Singapore: Legal Enforcement and Social Engineering

The city-state of Singapore provides a distinct model for cultivating civic responsibility through a combination of stringent legal enforcement and deliberate social engineering strategies, showcasing how a nation can transition from a developing country to a high-income powerhouse (Medel-Ramírez et al., 2023). This transformation has been largely underpinned by policies that promote order, cleanliness, and efficiency, fostering a collective identity that prioritizes communal well-being and adherence to societal norms (Manjrekar & Deshmukh, 2020). A key aspect of this model is the government's proactive role in shaping public behavior through meticulously planned urban policies and public campaigns, often employing a blend of incentivization and deterrents (Karenina et al., n.d.).

This approach extends to fostering public participation and engagement, which is viewed not just as a democratic ideal but as a pragmatic necessity for effective governance and sustainable development (Kumar et al., 2025; Kushwaha et al., 2023). This perspective often integrates public feedback into policy formulation, albeit within a structured framework that guides citizen involvement towards predetermined national objectives (Heyik et al., 2024; Joosten, 2021). This can include structured dialogues and citizen observatories, which have been shown to enhance bottom-up accountability and legitimacy in other contexts (Bak et al., 2021).

Examining how other countries cultivate civic sense provides useful insights for India. While cultural and institutional contexts differ, comparative analysis reveals practices that can inform reforms in the Indian context.

1. Japan: Cleanliness and Community Ownership

Japan's renowned emphasis on cleanliness and communal responsibility—deeply embedded in its cultural fabric through early education and community-led initiatives—offers a powerful model for fostering collective ownership in public spaces. This deep-seated civic consciousness, cultivated from a young age via comprehensive environmental education and community involvement, significantly bolsters urban resilience and sustainable living (Century et al., 2018). Regular community clean-up drives and educational programs exemplify this by instilling shared responsibility for public areas and environmental conservation, thereby reinforcing social cohesion and collective well-being. Such practices

cultivate a societal expectation that public spaces are extensions of one's home, encouraging voluntary compliance with norms of tidiness and respect (Taguchi, 2020).

In contrast, India's cleanliness campaigns like Swachh Bharat often rely on symbolic gestures rather than ingrained practices. Adapting Japan's experiential civic training could help Indian schools build lasting habits, while integrating concepts like "mottainai"—which emphasizes avoiding waste and valuing resources—would foster early appreciation for conservation, aligning with sustainable urban development goals (Anand, 2025). These culturally embedded values, paired with practical engagement opportunities, show how children's social responsibility develops through modeling, communication, and experiential learning, promoting self-efficacy and prosocial behaviors (Killen & Smetana, 2006). Frequent such opportunities are crucial for strengthening these behaviors, underscoring the need for sustained community-oriented activities (Killen & Smetana, 2006).

Moreover, Japan's community policing via the "Koban" system builds trust and proactive problem-solving by integrating law enforcement with local communities—a stark contrast to India's traditional models (Singh & Yadav, 2025). This approach prioritizes collective welfare through consistent, localized engagement and shared duty (Chong & Tsubota, 2023; Starkie et al., 2021). Complementing this, Japan's robust legal education programs, starting in early childhood, cultivate a law-abiding populace and healthy lifestyles, providing valuable lessons for global civic education (Xuân & Nhut, 2021). Overall, these pedagogical methods, emphasizing experiential learning and social responsibility from a young age, enhance moral development and social cohesion (Killen & Smetana, 2006).

2. Scandinavian Approaches: Trust and Compliance

Nordic countries such as Sweden and Denmark exhibit high levels of civic sense, rooted in trust between citizens and institutions. Citizens comply with rules not primarily out of fear of punishment but because they perceive institutions as fair and trustworthy. This societal trust is cultivated through transparent governance, minimal corruption, and comprehensive welfare systems that ensure equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. Such frameworks prioritize social-emotional learning to foster empathy and cooperation from early childhood, reinforcing social cohesion and individual well-being through national curricula and public health policies (Sultan & Khan, 2025; Xuân & Nhut, 2021). For instance, Denmark incorporates empathy training into its national curriculum, dedicating weekly hours to social problem-solving and perspective-taking among students, while Bhutan's "Gross National Happiness" framework similarly integrates compassion and emotional development into its mainstream education system (Sultan & Khan, 2025).

For India, this suggests that strengthening institutional credibility is as important as educating individuals. When governance is transparent and equitable, citizens are more likely to reciprocate with responsible behaviour. Investing in programs that promote emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning from a young age can further embed these values, paralleling successful models in high-trust societies (Sultan & Khan, 2025). This approach necessitates policy interventions across various life stages—including early childhood programs and school-based social-emotional learning initiatives—to leverage neuroplasticity and refine socio-emotional skills effectively (Sultan & Khan, 2025). Such initiatives are crucial for cultivating a citizenry that not only understands its rights and responsibilities but also actively participates in democratic processes and community building, thereby reinforcing civic vitality (Lee & Cnaan, 2024).

This emphasis on developing socio-emotional competencies within educational frameworks cultivates individuals who are not only civically engaged but also intrinsically motivated toward prosocial behaviors and moral development (Killen & Smetana, 2006; Lee & Cnaan, 2024). Indeed, a strong rule of law is critical in such societies, as it provides clear behavioral cues that promote moral engagement and encourage citizens to act reliably and truthfully (Graafland, 2023). In this trust-based environment, individuals are empowered to participate actively in societal discourse, ensuring their feedback on governmental policies and services is both valued and heard—ultimately fostering an informed citizenry and responsive governance (Medel-Ramírez et al., 2023). Furthermore, successful implementation of these policies requires cultural alignment, sustained support, and integration into broader systemic frameworks (Sultan & Khan, 2025).

3. Deliberative Democratic Processes in Urban Governance

Many urban centers, especially in Western democracies, are increasingly incorporating deliberative democratic processes to boost civic engagement and improve governance outcomes. These processes go beyond traditional public consultations by promoting inclusive dialogue, empowering citizens to shape policies, and instilling a sense of shared ownership in urban development initiatives (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019). They are crucial for tackling complex urban challenges—like the polarization of ideas and values—through structured spaces for discursive exchange that build social trust (Gebregiorgis et al., 2022; Perreault, 2024). Such models also strengthen bonding and bridging trust, fostering cooperation and mutual understanding among diverse community groups, which is essential for collective action and resilient urban development (Islamy & Nasrudin, 2025).

If effectively adapted, these deliberative forums could offer Indian citizens platforms to practice civic responsibility, cultivating habits of dialogue, compromise, and accountability. By enabling citizens to voice concerns and contribute to decision-making, they can address distrust and apathy, yielding more sustainable and publicly endorsed outcomes (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019; Park & Hong, 2025). Furthermore, integrating these approaches could alleviate communal tensions and promote social harmony through inclusive participation of diverse stakeholders, including marginalized communities (Roy, 2023). Ultimately, this would create a more inclusive governance framework that mirrors the needs and priorities of the entire population, bolstering the legitimacy and effectiveness of urban policymaking (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019).

4. Singapore: Law and Social Engineering

Singapore represents a different model, where strict enforcement and state-led campaigns have cultivated civic sense. Littering, vandalism, and other violations are heavily penalised, creating strong deterrents. While critics argue that such measures verge on authoritarianism, Singapore's success shows that legal enforcement can complement cultural norms. This model highlights how a robust legal framework, alongside public education and awareness campaigns, can shape civic behavior and establish a baseline for societal expectations (Karaoglan, 2025). The city-state exemplifies this by integrating artificial intelligence and optimizing information and communication technology with public participation to improve urban administration, further demonstrating successful governance-oriented smart urbanism. This approach, characterized by strong political will and stringent sanctioning mechanisms for misconduct, has consistently reinforced a culture of accountability and civic responsibility (Bak et al., 2021).

For India, the lesson is not to replicate Singapore's punitive model wholesale but to recognise the role of consistent enforcement in shaping behaviour. When citizens see that rules are applied universally, they are more likely to respect civic norms. This necessitates bolstering legislative and regulatory frameworks to ensure alignment with technological advancements and environmental objectives, alongside improved monitoring systems leveraging real-time air quality sensors for informed decision-making (Century et al., 2018; Gani & Sinaga, 2023). Such a comprehensive strategy integrates advanced technology with robust governance to achieve sustainable urban development, fostering both compliance and proactive engagement (Praharaj et al., 2018; Romanovska, 2025; Zhen et al., 2024). Furthermore, a well-organized institutional system is critical for the effective implementation and enforcement of environmental regulations, streamlining processes and encouraging cross-sectoral collaboration to overcome existing hurdles (Zhen et al., 2024).

Case Studies: Civic Responsibility in Action

Examination of specific cases—successful and failed initiatives—sheds light on the way civic responsibility works on the ground in India and elsewhere.

1. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (India)

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) was launched in 2014 with the objective of changing India's civic culture of sanitation and cleanliness. It was not just governmental spending on infrastructure, i.e., toilets and sanitation. It also included symbolic civic engagement campaigns, i.e., cleaning drives in public places. This initiative sought to instil a sense of collective responsibility for public hygiene, utilizing behavioural science principles such as social proof and commitment devices to nudge citizens towards active participation in community betterment (Anand, 2025). The campaign's success was significantly bolstered by public engagement, with official monitoring and management practices proving crucial for adherence to local government instructions (Salsabila et al., 2023).

Most citizens were eager to enrol in the first phase but were unable to maintain cleanliness habits. This is a larger problem: civic sense involves a long-term change of culture, not a short campaign. Sustained educational programs and continuous community engagement are vital to embed these practices into daily life, transforming initial enthusiasm into lasting behavioral shifts (Manjrekar & Deshmukh, 2020). Moreover, integrating green innovation strategies and effective waste management technologies can further support these efforts by reducing CO₂ emissions and fostering sustainable practices within urban environments (Afshan & Yaqoob, 2023). Such initiatives, coupled with robust policy frameworks and community involvement, can effectively address air pollution by promoting eco-friendly transportation and supporting corporate social responsibility in environmental protection (Bhat et al., 2024; Gani & Sinaga, 2023; Jain & K., 2024).

This multi-pronged approach, encompassing legislative action, technological integration, and societal engagement, is critical for achieving comprehensive environmental sustainability and fostering a proactive citizenry. For example, specific innovations in climate change adaptation and mitigation in various cities, even in low- and middle-income nations, showcase how localized efforts can drive significant environmental improvements despite broader policy gaps (Reckien et al., 2018). The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan exemplified a multi-sectoral strategy, encompassing public awareness, infrastructural development, and behavioral nudges, to address the entrenched issue of open defecation and poor sanitation practices across India. However, the long-term efficacy of such campaigns often hinges on

sustained political will, consistent funding, and continuous public participation beyond initial enthusiasm (Jiang et al., 2024).

2. Traffic discipline in Kerala

Kerala experienced relatively better enforcement of traffic laws than most other states. Mass campaigning, combined with enhanced enforcement and citizen action, has resulted in higher adherence to helmet and seat belt requirements. The case shows that with the visibility of enforcers on a consistent basis and complemented with civic education, behavioural change is achievable. This underscores the importance of a multi-faceted approach where stringent regulation and public awareness campaigns converge to foster widespread compliance and cultivate a culture of road safety (Century et al., 2018). Furthermore, community participation and engagement, often catalyzed through digital platforms and localized initiatives, play a pivotal role in reinforcing these behavioral shifts and ensuring the sustainability of improved traffic discipline (Gabai, 2025).

Such an integrated strategy, incorporating both top-down enforcement and bottom-up community involvement, exemplifies how effective governance and civic responsibility can mutually reinforce to achieve tangible improvements in public safety and order. However, sustaining such changes requires continuous public awareness initiatives and educational programs to embed these norms into cultural practices, as initial improvements can regress without ongoing reinforcement (Israilova et al., 2023; Mohamad, 2021). Indeed, studies indicate that consistent traffic enforcement significantly impacts public perception of being caught, thereby deterring violations, though the magnitude of this impact may vary and require further investigation to optimize enforcement strategies (Mohamad, 2021).

3. Local Government in Pune

The success of local government initiatives, such as those in Pune, often relies on robust financial backing from both municipal and central authorities to enhance essential public services, including municipal solid waste programs (Resolute, 2024). Deliberative forums like ward-level consultations were trying to involve citizens in policy-making and budgeting. Although there were still challenges—like elite capture and low turnouts—the effort showed that civic responsibility can be encouraged by institutional space, provided citizens feel that their power matters. This direct engagement fosters a sense of ownership and collective efficacy, demonstrating how structured public participation can lead to more inclusive and effective urban governance (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019). Moreover, sustained collaboration between civil society organizations and government bodies is crucial for capacity development, particularly in addressing issues pertinent to low-income households (Burra et al., 2018).

For instance, the establishment of deliberative democracy initiatives in Pune has demonstrated how structured civic engagement can lead to more responsive urban planning and service delivery, particularly in addressing complex challenges like street design and mobility (Menon & Hartz-Karp, 2019). These collaborative approaches highlight the potential for bottom-up policy formulation, where local knowledge and community priorities directly inform municipal decision-making processes, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance structures (Pandey, 2018). This is further exemplified by projects that involve both elected representatives and local officers in training, coupled with community programs, to achieve systemic changes in solid waste management (Nemec et al., 2015).

4. Japan's School Cleaning System

This pedagogical approach instills a profound sense of civic responsibility and environmental stewardship from a young age, integrating practical lessons in cleanliness and collective action into the educational curriculum. This not only ensures a pristine learning environment but also cultivates habits of discipline and cooperation among students, emphasizing that environmental sanitation is a shared duty (Alam & Hamzah, 2025). Japanese schools make students clean school facilities and classrooms on a daily basis. This creation of habits instills a sense of responsibility, respect for public space, and shared ownership. For India, the adoption of such habits in schools would bridge the gap between textbook civic knowledge and actual habits. Furthermore, extending this practice to include environmental clubs and field trips focused on ecological engagement could further deepen students' understanding and appreciation for environmental protection (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2020).

Such experiential learning opportunities, often overlooked in traditional curricula, are crucial for developing a generation of environmentally conscious citizens capable of addressing complex sustainability challenges (Alam & Hamzah, 2025). These initiatives, by fostering active engagement from an early age, could significantly contribute to the development of a civic-minded populace, capable of driving broader societal change through informed and responsible actions. This approach aligns with broader strategies emphasizing environmental education and community involvement as critical components for sustainable development (Gani & Sinaga, 2023). This integration of practical responsibility into daily education echoes the concept of "Mottainai" in Japan, where valuing and efficiently managing resources is a deeply ingrained cultural habit (Jakimiuk et al., 2023).

5. Participatory Budgeting in Brazil

Porto Alegre first applied participatory budgeting in the late 1980s, when citizens discussed and voted directly on priorities of city budgets. Not only was it more transparent, but it also had a high level of civic participation. In India, where budget-making is normally secretive, participatory budgeting would be a reform of governance as well as civic education. This method offers a tangible mechanism for fostering democratic engagement and accountability, empowering citizens to directly influence public resource allocation (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). Moreover, the implementation of such initiatives can cultivate a heightened sense of civic responsibility, as individuals witness the direct impact of their engagement on community development (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

This direct involvement can lead to more equitable distribution of resources and projects that truly reflect community needs, thereby strengthening democratic institutions and promoting social cohesion (Khouri, 2024). Furthermore, by empowering citizens with a direct voice in financial decisions, participatory budgeting can enhance transparency and reduce opportunities for corruption, ultimately fostering greater trust between the government and its constituents. These mechanisms can also be scaled up with government support, as exemplified by programs like Kudumbashree in Kerala, which empower women's groups in livelihood and sustainability initiatives (Nagendra, 2018). Similarly, Kerala's People's Plan Campaign also integrated participatory budgeting into decentralized planning, enabling local self-governments to manage budget proposals and significantly increasing community involvement, particularly among marginalized groups (Islam, 2025).

Solutions and Reforms towards Creating India's Civic Sense

Perpetuation of civic irresponsibility in India calls for a multi-pronged approach that includes education, the government, police, and social culture.

1. Civic Education Reform

Experiential Learning: Practical civic experience such as community service, conservation activities, and mock parliaments should be integrated into schools. Civic Education's report recognises that experiential learning creates stronger civic habits than memorisation. This approach moves beyond rote learning, fostering a deeper understanding of civic duties and rights through active participation and real-world application (Kurniawan et al., 2025). This pedagogical shift is critical for cultivating active citizens who possess not only theoretical knowledge but also the practical skills and motivation to engage constructively in their communities (Sekhaulelo, 2022). Moreover, such experiential methods, including activities like community service and mock legislative sessions, are instrumental in bridging the gap between abstract civic concepts and tangible actions, thereby enhancing civic awareness and participation among students (Taff et al., 2021).

Additionally, the integration of digital literacy programs within civic education can equip students with the tools to critically evaluate information and engage in informed online civic discourse, addressing contemporary challenges posed by misinformation and digital divides. Furthermore, by engaging with online platforms in structured educational settings, students can develop an understanding of digital citizenship, promoting responsible and ethical behavior in virtual communities. Ultimately, a comprehensive civic education reform must encompass both traditional participatory methods and modern digital competencies to prepare students for effective engagement in a rapidly evolving global society (Taff et al., 2021).

2. Building Law Enforcement

Selective enforcement is responsible for cynicism. Rules have to be enforced equally in either power or class. Adopting technology: Computerised traffic monitoring, electronic reporting of civic violations, and web-based public grievance systems can restrict corruption and enhance compliance, and Civic Sanctions with Education: Civic offence sanctions must be complemented by educational sanctions—i.e., exposing the offenders to civic consciousness workshops.

3. Institutional Reforms in Governance

Participatory Mechanisms: Drawing lessons from Pune and Brazilian experiences, institutionalised spaces of citizen deliberation must be encouraged in Indian cities. Transparency and Accountability: Trash data, public works data, and city budget data can assist in empowering citizens to monitor governance. Local Government Empowerment: Institutionalisation of panchayati raj and urban local bodies has the potential to bridge the institutional-citizen gap and make citizens responsible for civic performance.

4. Community and Cultural-Level Programs

Local citizens' welfare associations, NGOs, and community neighbourhoods can be entrusted with parks, roads, and garbage collection. This is done communally and inculcates a sense of responsibility. Media Role: Media campaigns can be utilised to place in the spotlight civic success stories and positive role models. Serialised stories as opposed to a one-off appeal work. Youth-Led Movements: Youth-led civic action—i.e., campus green movements or web movements—can sustain youth engagement beyond episodic activism.

5. Comparative Lessons Applicable to India

Experiential civic education, especially in schools, is something that Japan can teach India. India can learn the importance of institutional integrity and neutrality from the Nordic countries. India can follow Singapore's steady practice but without the authoritarian excess. Participatory governance systems can be imagined in India's pluralistic and democratic context, inspired by Brazil.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that India's civic deficit is not merely a behavioral problem but a systemic challenge rooted in historical, institutional, and cultural factors. Strengthening civic responsibility requires a holistic strategy integrating educational reform, consistent legal enforcement, judicial integrity, improved institutional trust, and participatory governance. Comparative experiences from Japan, Nordic countries, Singapore, and Brazil indicate that civic sense flourishes when citizens are empowered, institutions are credible, and civic learning is embedded in daily practice. Cultivating civic responsibility is therefore essential for strengthening India's democratic resilience and achieving sustainable national development.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and documentary analysis, which may not fully capture local variations in civic behavior across India's diverse socio-cultural contexts. The qualitative approach does not include field interviews, ethnographic observations, or quantitative behavioral measurements, limiting the empirical generalizability of findings. Additionally, comparative insights are illustrative rather than comprehensive, as national contexts differ widely in governance structures and cultural traditions.

Future studies should incorporate mixed-method approaches combining surveys, behavioral experiments, and ethnographic fieldwork to more precisely measure civic consciousness across regions. Research should also explore digital civic participation among youth, local-level institutional reforms, and the impact of judicial activism on civic compliance. Comparative cross-country studies can further identify which contextual factors most effectively shape civic responsibility. Longitudinal studies are recommended to evaluate the long-term effects of experiential civic education and participatory governance initiatives in Indian cities.

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