

What's Ailing Us? Understanding the Tension between Civic Aspirations and Civic Conduct in Contemporary India

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Modern India stands at a critical moment in its journey toward development. The nation aspires to achieve global standards in infrastructure, public health, governance, and education. Yet, our daily civic conduct often contradicts these ambitions. This widening gap between what we expect collectively and how we behave individually lies at the heart of India's civic crisis. We seek the outcomes of a mature, advanced society, but often fall short of the civic discipline required to sustain such a society.

Our stated objective as a nation is clear: to build an India that is clean, efficient, healthy, ethical, inclusive, and globally competitive. We want world-class cities, advanced healthcare systems, transparent governance, innovative educational institutions, and public services that match the best international benchmarks. Yet, the lived reality frequently reveals a contradiction between aspiration and action. The disorder we see in public spaces, unmanaged waste, chaos on the roads, disregard for rules, and a general neglect of the commons is not merely the result of institutional underperformance. It reflects a deeper erosion of civic consciousness and a weakening of the social contract that binds a community together.

Public dissatisfaction regarding deteriorating roads, polluted surroundings, poor municipal services, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies is widespread. These concerns dominate public discourse and frequently become the focus of criticism directed at the government. Yet, these frustrations mask a fundamental truth: many of these problems arise as much from citizen behaviour as from administrative gaps. A reluctance to take personal responsibility visible in littering, vandalising public spaces, breaking queues, misusing facilities, ignoring laws, or accepting bribery as routine has gradually taken root. These behaviours are not restricted to any one section of society. Privilege may sometimes manifest as entitlement, enabling people to bypass systems, while

scarcity may lead to indifference or resignation. In the end, both attitudes weaken the collective civic discipline required for a society to function smoothly.

The challenge becomes even more visible when examining the present state of public health. India has made commendable strides in disease control, medical innovation, emergency response, and universal health initiatives. Despite this progress, the system remains strained by overcrowded facilities, uneven access, staff shortages, and a high burden of preventable infections. Public hospitals often struggle not only because of limited resources but also due to poor adherence to hygiene norms by both visitors and patients. Basic expectations, hand hygiene, waste segregation, maintaining clean surroundings, respecting hospital protocols are inconsistently followed. In many places, hospital infection control practices are seen as the responsibility of only the staff, when in reality they depend on collective participation. These lapses, though sometimes systemic, also indicate a societal attitude that does not place cleanliness, discipline, or preventive health at the forefront.

The pressures extend into the medical profession itself. Doctors and nurses work under immense pressure, often with limited manpower, outdated infrastructure, and intense public expectations. They face increasing scrutiny, amplified by social media, yet operate within governance structures that are sometimes opaque, inconsistent, or inadequately monitored. Ethical lapses by a few tarnish the reputation of the many who serve with dedication and integrity. Effective governance in healthcare must therefore include transparent processes, accountable leadership, continuous peer review, clear ethical guidelines, and a culture that encourages excellence as much as humility. Without strengthening these pillars of professional governance, public trust—an essential element of any health system will continue to weaken.

Civic deficiencies are also visible in our educational ecosystem. While India produces outstanding professionals, scholars, and innovators, concerns persist over the overall quality of learning, student discipline, and character formation. Many students excel academically yet struggle with communication, leadership, responsibility, or civic awareness. Classrooms increasingly emphasise academic performance but often neglect values such as empathy, teamwork, respect for diversity, and respect for rules—values that ultimately shape responsible citizens. If we hope to create ethical professionals, empathetic leaders, and conscientious citizens, our education system must consciously nurture these qualities.

These contradictions spill over into other aspects of daily life. Careless tourism continues to damage mountains, beaches, forests, and heritage sites—spaces that carry immense ecological and cultural significance. The disregard for traffic rules leads to chaos on the roads and thousands of preventable accidents. Public interactions, particularly in crowded spaces, increasingly reflect impatience, aggression, and a lack of courtesy. The tone of public discourse, especially online, often leans toward polarisation and hostility rather than reasoned debate.

If India is to advance meaningfully, material progress alone will not suffice. A nation's development must be underpinned by a civic renewal grounded in discipline, courtesy, environmental stewardship, public health consciousness, academic integrity, and shared ownership of common spaces. This transformation requires both institutional reform and individual introspection. Institutions can create frameworks, incentives, and structures, but citizens must make these systems work through responsible behaviour.

Several steps can help ignite this change. Civic education must be embedded into school curricula not as a theoretical subject but as a lived practice through school culture, community service, and experiential learning. Hospital infection control must be strengthened through strict enforcement, continuous staff training, and public-awareness campaigns. Governance across professions should be transparent, timely, and accountable. Public spaces should be designed in ways that encourage responsible behaviour, with clear signage, adequate facilities, and community monitoring. Citizen participation through resident associations, volunteer groups, and public feedback systems should be encouraged and recognised. Most importantly, society must promote role models whose conduct reflects integrity, compassion, discipline, and public-mindedness.

Above all, this change requires a shift in mind-set: from seeing civic responsibility as optional, to recognising it as an essential national duty. Every citizen must understand that progress is not something delivered by governments alone but something built collectively through millions of responsible daily actions.

A truly civilised society is not defined by the sophistication of its demands but by how it cares for what is shared. Unless we rebuild a collective sense of responsibility, India risks aspiring to greatness while neglecting the behavioural foundations that make greatness sustainable. The path forward requires not only better systems but better citizens—citizens whose conduct aligns with the nation we hope to build.

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