

Civic Sense as Behavioral Infrastructure: Reflexive Governance and Public Responsibility in Decentralized India

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ABSTRACT

The civic sense, conceived as a form of behavioral infrastructure, constitutes the foundational yet under-theorized pillar of democratic governance—particularly within the decentralized systems like those in India. Moving beyond its conventional framing as etiquette or social courtesy, the civic sense functions as a structural force shaping the institutional efficiency, public trust, and participatory accountability. This study interrogates the role of the civic ethos in local governance by drawing on comparative evidence from Dhaka (Bangladesh) and multiple districts in Kerala (India). It demonstrates that the civic indifference—expressed through disregard for public norms, low community engagement and rule evasion—undermines policy outcomes, and strains institutional capacity. In contrast, ethically informed public conduct, when cultivated through inclusive education, social modelling, and participatory spaces, reinforces governance responsiveness. Grounded in a reflexive governance framework, the study proposes an integrated model that connects citizenly practices with systemic performance, offering policy innovations such as civic audits, participatory dashboards, and embedded civic learning. Empirical findings highlight how variables such as age, gender, and institutional trust influence civic responsiveness, and affirm that democratic decentralization requires more than structural devolution—it demands a cultural infrastructure of responsibility and engagement. By positioning civic sense as a measurable, teachable, and policy-relevant dimension of governance, the paper contributes to contemporary debates in democratic theory, public administration, and civic renewal in postcolonial societies.

KEY WORDS: Civic Responsibility, Local Governance, Decentralization, Institutional Trust, Public Participation

1. INTRODUCTION¹

In every democratic society, the relationship between the citizen and the government is crucial to the vibrancy of the administration. At the heart of this relationship lies a relatively under-explored but foundational idea—the civic sense. While policy discourses often focus on institutional structures, legal mechanisms, and the governance reforms, the behavioral dimension of governance—how citizens conduct themselves in public spaces, interact with state institutions and internalize responsibilities—remains marginal. Yet, it is this civic conduct that gives life to our constitutional ideals. The civic sense—marked by social ethics, respect for laws, maintenance of public spaces and engagement in civic

duties—becomes the social glue that binds the democratic order.

In contemporary India, this civic ethic is increasingly under strain. Instances of public indiscipline, poor sanitation behavior, traffic violations, and disengagement from local governance processes signal a civic deficit that impairs both the quality of life and the efficiency of governance (Tarannum, 2016). At the same time, local self-governments, intended as the fulcrum of participatory democracy, are witnessing challenges of accountability, public apathy and elite capture (Mookherjee, 2012). Despite the constitutional devolution through the 73rd and 74th Amendments, local bodies often function without meaningful citizen engagement. This disjuncture between civic behavior and institutional

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governance mechanisms forms the central problem space of this study.

Understanding civic sense as more than moral instruction—as a political and developmental imperative—is significant and crucial. It transcends individual morality and enters the domain of governance performance, resource allocation and the democratic sustainability. The idea that governance can be improved not only from above (through better institutions) but also from below (through improved civic conduct and participation) forms the theoretical and empirical thrust. This chapter sets the stage for an in-depth inquiry into how civic sense interacts with the local governance processes in contemporary India. It adopts a systematic approach—moving from general conceptual clarifications to the specific research justifications—to unfold the complexity of the civic behavior as a governance variable. It also aims to position the study in ongoing debates on democratic decentralization, participatory citizenship and grassroots accountability.

1.1 Background and Rationale

Governance is ingrained in the everyday behavior and responsiveness of citizens and state actors and goes beyond the mere implementation of policies. The efficacy of local institutions is directly impacted by civic sense, which includes actions that demonstrate public responsibility, such as following traffic laws, managing waste, and showing respect for property. Harold Laski (2004) famously asserted that the local self-government cultivates civic responsibility and community cooperation. This insight becomes more pertinent in today's rapidly urbanizing and politically complex India. Despite decentralized governance guarantees, citizen involvement in local governance is minimal, and urban local bodies often struggle with basic service delivery due to institutional weaknesses and public non-cooperation. Meanwhile, rural Panchayat (village-level self-government unit) faces bureaucratic inertia, elite domination, and limited civic oversight (Ansari, 2020). Such patterns point not merely to governance deficits but to a crisis in civic engagement.

In urban contexts, the civic sense is often treated as a behavioral problem to be resolved through awareness campaigns. However, as Tarannum (2016) notes in her empirical study of Dhaka, the civic sense must be examined in its political, socioeconomic and legal contexts. In India too, the lack of civic behavior cannot be seen in isolation from systemic issues such as ineffective civic education, absence of public dialogue, and the policy myopia that underplays the citizen's behavioral role in governance outcomes. Recent attempts at participatory planning and citizen monitoring—such as ward sabhas, citizen report cards and participatory budgeting—show promise. Yet, their limited success

points to a broader need for inculcating civic values through structured civic education and institutional reform (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). This study addresses the theoretical and empirical gap by investigating civic sense not just as a personal etiquette, but as a micro-politics of public responsibility with the measurable implications for governance efficacy.

1.2 Methodological Note

This study aims to investigate the relationship between the civic sense and the local governance outcomes in contemporary India. In the context of democratic local governance, it conceptualizes civic sense as a political and developmental category. Additionally, it assesses the impact of civic behaviour on local governance performance and identifies critical institutional, behavioral, and educational factors that either strengthen or weaken citizens' civic sense. A policy-oriented framework that integrates civic sensibility into the planning and operational frameworks of local self-governments is also suggested, along with an investigation into civic education, participatory governance, and behavioral change models that could foster a culture of civic responsibility in both urban and rural India. What, in the context of Indian local governance, is civic sense, and how does civic behavior affect the operation of local government institutions are among the research questions. Concerns are also raised about the socioeconomic cultural, and institutional factors that influence citizens' civic behavior as well as how contemporary civic education and awareness initiatives affect public accountability. The study is designed as exploratory and diagnostic, drawing comparative lessons from international models such as the UK's local civic education initiatives and South Korea's citizen-led governance.

2. CIVIC SENSE - A THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The civic sense, though often dismissed as a matter of common courtesy or personal etiquette, has far-reaching implications for public life, democratic governance and the institutional accountability. The lack of civic sensibility is not just a social annoyance in the current era of rapid social change, urbanization, political polarization and governance issues—such as modern-day India—but rather a structural shortcoming in the democratic culture. While the Constitution of India articulates the citizens' rights and duties, the everyday enactment of these principles in public life hinges on civic awareness, ethical conduct, and internalized responsibility. The aim here is to transcend the narrow behaviorist view that reduces civic sense to following rules and instead understand it as a socio-ethical disposition that mediates the relationship

between the citizen and the state. By connecting public ethics, norms of reciprocity, legal frameworks, and educational interventions, this segment lays the groundwork for interpreting civic sense as a political resource and cultural condition for local governance.

2.1 Conceptualizing Civic Sense: Ethics, Norms, and Public Behavior

The civic sense in its conceptual sphere refers to the normative orientation of individuals in relation to public life. It includes respect for social norms, consideration for others, responsibility towards community resources and constructive engagement with civic institutions. This conception builds on the classical notion of *civitas*, where civic behavior was seen as the integral to sustaining the public sphere and democratic order (Arendt, 1958). Ethically, civic sense is embedded in *deontological* principles (duty-based conduct) as well as the *consequentialist* logic (the outcomes of actions for society). The Golden Rule—"treat others as you wish to be treated"—is arguably the simplest expression of the civic sense. In public policy terms, the civic sense influences everything from littering and noise pollution to electoral participation and bureaucratic accountability.

Significantly, the civic sense is performative and relational as it manifests through the interactions in shared spaces—roads, parks, community centers, public offices—and reflects one's internalized social values. Its absence often indicates not a lack of knowledge, but a breakdown in moral imagination and community belonging (Sen, 2009). In this point, the civic sense is the behavioral face of social ethics, transforming abstract values into public actions. Also, the civic sense is not neutral as it is shaped by the power structures, socialization processes, and the institutional cultures. Any short in the civic behavior often mirrors poor governance; public indiscipline can be both a cause and consequence of state dysfunction. As such, the civic sense must be understood not just as a matter of the individual failure but also of systemic neglect in fostering the ethical citizenship.

2.2 Historical Evolution of Civic Responsibility in Governance Thought

The idea of civic responsibility has evolved alongside the development of the democratic governance. In Athenian democracy, the active participation in public life was not only encouraged but also expected. Citizens were obligated to deliberate in assemblies, contribute to public goods and defend the city-state—laying the groundwork for associating the civic behavior with democratic health (Held, 2006). During the eve of enlightenment, thinkers like Rousseau, Locke, and Kant emphasized the social contract, in which individual freedoms were balanced by duties towards the collective.

Thus, the civic responsibility emerged as a core aspect of modern citizenship—anchored in legal equality, moral autonomy and public participation (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994).

In the post-colonial Indian political situation, the concept of responsible citizenship was championed by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who envisioned *swaraj* not merely as political independence but as moral self-governance. The civic sense, according to Gandhi, as a spiritual discipline—reflected in sanitation, simplicity, non-violence and social service (Parekh, 1995). Constitutionally, the Fundamental Duties (Article 51A) of the Indian Constitution sought to reassert the civic responsibility in the post-national emergency period (1976). Yet these duties remain aspirational and largely unenforced, pointing to a persistent normative gap between the legal expectations and everyday conduct. In the contemporary governance theories, i.e., collaborative governance and deliberative democracy, stress civic responsibility as a precondition for the functional decentralization and the inclusive policy-making (Fung & Wright, 2003). Civic sense, in these paradigms, is not passive obedience but the active ownership of the public realm.

2.3 Civic Sense vs Legal Compliance: Towards a Moral Democracy

There is a critical distinction between legal compliance and civic sense. The legal compliance is externally enforced, grounded in fear of punishment or formal obligations. But the civic sense is internally motivated—a reflection of the moral maturity, empathy, and the ethical socialization. This distinction is crucial in understanding the democratic quality. In a merely legalistic society, the rules are followed in form but not in spirit. For instance, an individual may obey the traffic rules only in the presence of law enforcement, while disregarding them otherwise. Conversely, a civically responsible citizen internalizes the rationale behind rules, ensuring compliance even in the absence of surveillance (Cowell & Andrews, 2005).

The shift from legalistic governance to moral democracy entails cultivating a citizenry that acts from volition rather than coercion. This is particularly relevant for the local governance, where proximity between the state and citizen allows for participatory engagement, ethical negotiation, and mutual accountability. As Rawls (1971) judged, a just society is not merely rule-bound but value-driven. In the Indian context, this moral deficit is visible in the public indifference to governance processes, low levels of community participation, and routine violations of civic norms. When governance becomes a 'transaction' rather than a 'relationship', the civic sense erodes and public institutions lose legitimacy. Rebuilding

this trust requires going beyond the administrative reform to ethical re-education.

2.4 Civic Education as a Mechanism of Internalization

The education system can play a transformative role in embedding civic values into the consciousness of citizens. Unlike mere information dissemination, true civic education fosters critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and a sense of belonging. It acts as the primary mechanism for internalizing the civic sense from a young age and reinforces these norms throughout life. In our schools, civic education is often limited to textbook knowledge about rights and the government structure. However, effective civic education involves experiential learning through community projects, simulations, and participatory platforms like youth parliaments. As Cardiff University's review suggests, civic education must extend beyond classrooms to public campaigns, adult learning, and workplace ethics (Cowell & Andrews, 2005).

There are successful international models which offers inspiration. In Norway, civic education integrates classroom instruction with local governance immersion. In South Korea, civic movements also collaborate with educational institutions to instill democratic values in young people. But in India's case, experience-based civic learning still remains limited. At the policy level, India's National Education Policy 2020 calls for the inclusion of values-based education and active citizenship. This opens an avenue for institutionalizing the civic education not just as a curricular mandate but as a cultural mission. If then, the civic sense is sustained as the education aligns with ethics and knowledge is translated into action. Hence, the civic education is not a luxury of liberal democracies but the necessity for any society that aspires to dignity, harmony, and justice in public life.

3. LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF DECENTRALIZATION

This section critically examines the interlinked dynamics of local governance and the decentralization, situating them within the broader discourse of democratic participation and civic sense. India's constitutional framework provides for a three-tier system of governance, but the operational vitality of its third tier—local self-governments—depends not only on administrative reforms but also on an informed and participatory citizenry. In this light, civic sense becomes both an outcome and a prerequisite of effective decentralized governance.

3.1 Decentralized Governance: Principles and Practice

The decentralized governance refers to the systematic devolution of powers, responsibilities, and resources from the central authorities to lower tiers of the government. This paradigm emerged as a response to the limitations of the centralized bureaucracy in addressing the local needs. Globally, decentralization is associated with enhancing administrative efficiency, fostering democratic participation, and improving the developmental outcomes (Manor, 1999). In India, decentralization found institutional anchorage in the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which constitutionally recognized the Panchayat (village-level self-government unit) i Raj Institutions (PRIs), and the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) as the third tier-three tier of governance. These amendments provided a framework for the participatory planning, resource mobilization and local-level accountability. Key features include the constitutionally mandated elections, reservations for women and marginalized group, and the formation of District Planning Committees.

However, decentralization is not a monolithic process. It involves various forms such as,

- **De-concentration** (administrative dispersal)
- **Delegation** (transfer of responsibilities)
- **Devolution** (constitutional or statutory empowerment)
- **Privatization** (transfer to non-state actors)

The democratic decentralization, particularly devolution, is considered the most empowering because it provides the legal autonomy to local governments to make decisions and raise resources independently. In practice, the decentralization in India is facing challenges such as the dominance of state bureaucracies, inconsistent fund flows and the lack of institutional capacities. Moreover, public apathy, low awareness and weak civic engagement further impede it's working.

3.2 Legal and the Institutional Frameworks of Local Self-Government

The legal architecture of the local governance in India is anchored in two historic amendments of the Constitution of India.

- The 73rd Amendment (1992) which institutionalized the PRIs and introduced a three-tier system in local governance—the Gram Panchayats (village-level self-government unit) s, the Block Panchayat (village-level self-government unit), and the Zilla Panchayat (village-level self-government unit). It emphasized the democratic decentralization through periodic elections, financial devolution and the people's participation in the planning mechanisms.

- The 74th Amendment (1992) provided a constitutional status to urban local bodies (Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayat (village-level self-government unit)s), laying the groundwork for inclusive urban governance.

These amendments mandated the creation of such as,

- State Election Commissions are to ensure the regular and fair elections
- State Finance Commissions to recommend the financial transfers
- District and Metropolitan Planning Committees for the integrated regional development

Despite these progressive provisions, actual implementation still remains uneven. Many of the Indian states retain control over key decisions such as staffing, fund allocation and planning approvals. This limits the autonomy and innovation potential of the local bodies. Further, the Panchayat (village-level self-government unit) s (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996, aimed to empower the tribal communities by recognizing the traditional decision-making processes, but its enforcement remains patchy due to the administrative resistance and conflicting legal frameworks. Thus, while the legal scaffolding exists, the institutional ecosystem lacks robustness and the legal provisions often remain on paper without a strong civic and administrative push for the operationalization.

3.3 Participation and Citizenship: Comparative Theories and Models

In governance, citizenship encompasses more than just legal identity; it also refers to social responsibility, active political engagement and community belonging. Political theorists have advanced multiple models to conceptualize citizenship and its participatory expression. A quick look as follows,

1. Liberal-Individualist Model – The focuses on rights and the legal entitlements.
2. Civic-Republican Model – The emphasis on civic virtue, active participation, and public deliberation.
3. Civic-Pluralist Model – It advocates for cultural inclusivity and group-based representation.

In the context of local governance, the participatory models have evolved into diverse mechanisms in different countries, such as participatory budgeting (exemplified by Porto Alegre, Brazil), citizen juries and deliberative forums (pioneered in the UK) and social audits and community report cards (effectively implemented in states like Rajasthan, India). While these models originate from varied political cultures, they share a core democratic ethos: enhancing citizen agency in decision-making and ensuring transparency in resource allocation.

Indian adaptations, particularly the *social audit process under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)*, demonstrate how grassroots engagement can expose the leakages and improve accountability. However, the efficacy of such mechanisms depends heavily on the institutional scaffolding and civic invitation. Evidence suggests that the participation

becomes meaningful when citizens are not merely permitted, but actively *invited* to participate—through formalized roles, community mobilization and assured feedback loops. The perception of being heard and seeing tangible impacts—such as revised budgets, redressed grievances or improved services which cultivates civic trust and long-term engagement.

All international research, including regression models from Europe and the U.S., shows a strong correlation between social capital—measured by trust, associational membership, and volunteerism—and improved governance outcomes. In India, too, the local governance experiments like Kerala's *People's Plan Campaign* reveal that when the citizens perceive ownership, administrative responsiveness, and service delivery improve. However, the participation is not inherently equitable. It may reinforce the dominant caste-class interests, marginalize women's voices or be reduced to ritualistic consultation. This risk is particularly acute in India's stratified social fabric. Therefore, robust institutional design, inclusive facilitation and sustained civic education are essential to ensure that participation does not become performative, but instead fosters genuine democratic deepening.

3.4 From Electoral Representation to Civic Engagement

While the electoral representation remains the cornerstone of modern democracy, it is increasingly clear that 'a vote once in every five years' is inadequate for fostering the responsive, accountable governance system. A managing transit towards civic engagement—where citizens co-create, monitor, and deliberate on public policies—is vital for deepening democracy. This transition will reflect the evolution from representative democracy to participatory and deliberative democracy. As Gaventa and Valderamma (1999) argue, decentralized governance creates new arenas for participation, but also demands new skills and strategies for engagement.

In India, a few key innovations signal this shift; they are

- Social audits under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)
- Citizens' charters and RTI (Right to Information) as accountability tools,
- Gram Sabhas and Ward Committees as local deliberative bodies
- MyCityMyBudget campaign in Bengaluru, enabling citizen participation in fiscal decisions

Despite these few initiatives, there are barriers too,

- Lack of awareness about the participatory forums among the public

- Low capacities among the elected representatives at the decentralized level
- Gender, caste, and literacy-based exclusion in these forums
- Administrative reluctance to cede decision-making power

To overcome these barriers, civic engagement must be institutionalized – not as an act of benevolence but as a democratic entitlement. The civic sense, therefore, becomes the ethical bridge that connects representation with engagement. It empowers the citizens to hold their representatives accountable beyond elections and fosters a culture of co-governance.

4: CIVIC SENSE AND GOVERNANCE INTERFACE: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The civic sense serves as the invisible infrastructure of operative governance. While the local governments construct policies and provide services, the real test of public systems lies in how the citizens interact with them – do they obey traffic laws, dispose waste responsibly and engage in civic life, or do they undermine governance through apathy and indiscipline? The city of Dhaka, Bangladesh's sprawling capital and one of South Asia's most densely populated urban centers, presents a compelling empirical case. Despite administrative planning and legislative frameworks, the quality of life in Dhaka has declined in many metrics. Scholars and planners have long blamed the institutional capacity. However, a closer look reveals another pressing challenge – a decline in the civic sense among the citizens. This section evaluates the urban crisis in Dhaka not just as a result of governance failure, but also as a civic shortfall. It draws from an empirical study by Adiba Tarannum (2016), which assessed citizen behavior and identified the key factors that drive or restrain civic conduct. Through systematic sampling, questionnaire-based data and interpretative analysis, the case uncovers how individual mindset, legal enforcement and the educational background shape the civic outcomes – and by extension, the health of urban governance.

4.1 Case Study: Dhaka and the Decline of Urban Civic Sense

This case study illustrates the complex interaction between the rapid urbanization, and the erosion of civic responsibility. With over 16 million residents, the city struggles not only with infrastructural congestion and environmental degradation but also with behavioral dysfunctions that hinder governance efficiency. These include improper waste disposal, disregard for traffic norms, and a widespread neglect of public hygiene. To investigate how civic behaviors impact urban governance, the study used a stratified sample of 100

respondents across age and gender categories, assessing their responses to real-life civic situations through a structured questionnaire. Findings reveal that two primary forces shape their civic conduct: driving factors that promote uncivil behaviors and the restraining factors that encourage civic responsibility. Among the former, civilian mindset scored highest (4.6), pointing to normalized apathy – attitudes like 'everyone does it' and 'rules don't apply to me'. Weak law enforcement (4.2) was also significant, and suggesting that without credible deterrence, formal rules lose impact. Conversely, the value-based education emerged as the most influential restraining factor (4.0), reinforcing the importance of early moral socialization in promoting civic ethics.

The other responses across various scenarios confirmed these dynamics. For instance, 80% of young males admitted that they would not use a pedestrian over-bridge when in a hurry, while older females showed higher compliance, reflecting generational and gender-based differences in civic discipline. Similarly, 100% of female respondents used dustbins for waste disposal, compared to 70% of males, many of whom justified non-compliance by citing the social mimicry. Encouragingly, a large proportion of respondents showed willingness to reduce noise near the hospitals and mosques, indicating that cultural norms can positively align with civic ethics. More troubling was the 40% of young males who supported mob justice, revealing how the civic norms can be undermined by media-fueled vigilantism. Such findings point to the urgent need for targeted interventions in education, law enforcement and public messaging.

This Dhaka case resonates strongly with the Indian urban contexts, where cities like Delhi and Mumbai face similar tensions between development and behavioral apathy. Attitudes such as 'yeh mera kaam nahi hai' (this is not my responsibility) reflect a deep civic disengagement, particularly among the younger urban males. While policies like Swachh Bharat have made gains, their impact remains limited without sustained civic education and inclusive public campaigns. Lessons from Dhaka suggest that improving urban governance requires not just better infrastructure, but a reconstitution of citizenship as the ethical, accountable, and community-oriented behaviors.

4.2 Kerala Contextualization

The Kerala state presents a compelling counterpoint to Dhaka's urban civic challenges. Across sanitation, participation, and service delivery, the state's governance model offers strong evidence of the behavioral and institutional synergy. The Working Group Report (Kerala State Planning Board, 2022) indicates that over 78% of Panchayats (village-level self-government unit) s report high satisfaction with the sanitation services and

community participation. Moreover, civic behaviors during crises—especially the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrated Kerala’s unique fusion of decentralization, trust-based communication and community engagement.

In Wayanad and Idukki, the civic norms are sustained not by punitive enforcement, but by culturally embedded practices. The tribal councils and community elders informally regulate behaviors such as waste disposal and noise pollution, producing higher compliance without the formal sanction. The KILA-NUALS (2023) study reveals that 90% of local governments in these districts ensured continuity in waste collection, while 86% maintained healthcare access through ASHA and Kudumbashree networks. Ernakulam, in contrast, presents a more complex scenario. While institutional mechanisms like ward sabhas are in place, civic behaviors—especially among urban male youth—exhibit gaps similar to those in Dhaka. Data from Kochi Corporation’s civic grievance portal (2022) shows that 61% of sanitation complaints originated in wards with the lower public participation rates. This suggests that governance structures alone are insufficient without behavioral reciprocity.

These variations across Kerala’s districts reveal the importance of integrating behavioral insights with decentralized planning. Local governance must go beyond service provision to nurture civic habitus. Initiatives like participatory planning audits, Kudumbashree’s neighborhood groups, and community-based disaster response have strengthened Kerala’s civic ethos. Yet, persistent gaps—especially among disengaged urban youth—demand renewed focus on civic education and inclusive policy messaging.

Table 1:

Civic Compliance Comparison

Behaviour	Dhaka (Youth M)	Kerala (Youth M)	Kerala (Women 30+)
Waste disposal	70%	82%	100%
Traffic obedience	26.6% use bridges	42% use bridges	87% use bridges
Mob reaction	40% support	21% condone	5% condone

The study reveals significant disparities in civic compliance behaviours between Dhaka and Kerala. In Dhaka, waste disposal is lower, with only 70% of young males adhering to proper practices, compared to 82% of young males and 100% of women over 30 in Kerala. Traffic adherence is also lower, with only 26.6% of young males in Dhaka using over-bridges, indicating a disregard for safety and civic norms. In Kerala, compliance rises to 42% among young males and 87% among women over 30, indicating a generational and gendered divide. Mob reaction data shows a significant difference in civic attitudes, with 40% of young males in

Dhaka supporting mob violence, compared to 21% in Kerala and 5% in Dhaka. These findings suggest that civic compliance is influenced by cultural, educational, and socio-economic factors, necessitating targeted interventions to foster a stronger civic sense in urban environments.

4.3 Detailed Analysis: Domains of Civic Behavior and Governance Impact

While Kerala’s decentralized governance structure demonstrates the relative success in promoting civic responsibility, granular behavioral patterns still reveal areas of fragility—particularly in urban zones and among the youth cohorts. This section disaggregates civic behaviors across five domains: traffic compliance, waste management, noise regulation, emergency response, and governance feedback loops.

A. Traffic Compliance and Risk Behavior: Traffic discipline is a prominent civic indicator. According to the Kerala Road Safety Authority (2022), nearly 58% of traffic violations in Ernakulam district were attributed to males aged 18–30, indicating a pattern of risk tolerance among young urban males. This mirrors Dhaka’s findings, where only 26.6% of young men reported using overbridges in a hurry. In contrast, compliance among older women in both contexts was significantly higher, pointing to gendered and generational distinctions in civic accountability.

B. Waste Disposal and Environmental Hygiene: The data from the Suchitwa Mission (2023) reports that 83% of households in Wayanad and Idukki consistently segregate and dispose of household waste properly, supported by local women’s collectives and tribal customary norms. In urban Ernakulam, however, improper dumping remains a persistent issue. The Kochi Corporation’s grievance portal (2022) shows that over 60% of sanitation complaints originated in wards with lower civic engagement, suggesting that formal systems alone are insufficient without active behavioural ownership.

C. Noise Pollution and Public Empathy: Compliance with the noise restrictions, particularly near hospitals and religious places, shows the sharp behavioural divergence. A rapid survey conducted by a local NGO in Thiruvananthapuram (2022) found that 94% of respondents aged 30–50 reported reducing noise near sensitive zones. However, only 64% of males aged 18–30 demonstrated the same awareness. This highlights a need for value-based civic education that emphasizes empathy as a public ethic, especially among younger urban populations.

D. Emergency Responsiveness and Altruism: The public reaction in emergencies serves as a litmus test for civic maturity. When asked about yielding to ambulances, 100% of respondents in the KILA-NUALS

(2023) study claimed they would. However, motivations varied: older adults cited legal and moral obligations, while youth often mentioned performative motives—such as being observed by others. This divergence underscores a shift from internalized civic responsibility to externalized compliance, which can weaken long-term civic culture.

E. Statistical Nexus Between Civic Behavior and Governance Feedback: The civic indifference has measurable effects on governance quality. In a correlational analysis by the Kerala Planning Board (2022), wards with low civic compliance also had higher backlogs in service delivery and greater citizen dissatisfaction in grievance redress. Conversely, Panchayat (village-level self-government unit)s reporting high civic participation also ranked highest in Swachh Survekshan indexes and audit transparency metrics. This confirms that behavioral gaps are not merely cultural but have institutional consequences, creating feedback loops that reinforce or erode governance legitimacy.

5: REBUILDING THE CIVIC-GOVERNANCE LINK: POLICY AND PRACTICE

The preceding analysis reveals that civic sense, while often treated as an intangible moral attribute, is a critical component of governance capacity. Citizens who understand, value, and practice civic norms help co-create a culture of public accountability, while civic indifference can sabotage even the most well-designed policies. Rebuilding the civic-governance link thus demands a twofold approach: **institutional reform** and **behavioral transformation**. The state must provide platforms and incentives for civic participation, while also investing in the long-term cultivation of civic virtues through education, dialogue, and cultural reinforcement.

This chapter outlines practical frameworks to reintegrate civic sense into governance design. Drawing upon global best practices, it examines strategies such as civic education, participatory mechanisms, institutional trust-building, and digital engagement. Together, these strategies represent a shift from governance *for* citizens to governance *with* citizens—a model vital for deepening democracy in 21st-century India.

5.1 Civic Education in Local Governance Systems

The civic education, when embedded within local governance systems, serves as the behavioral infrastructure—instilling norms of participation, accountability, and public-mindedness. Its purpose extends beyond awareness; it cultivates ethical agency and sustained democratic engagement, particularly vital at the local level where the citizens directly interface with governance. The international models offer instructive parallels. In the UK, the local councils use participatory

tools—such as youth parliaments, mock council sessions, and neighborhood forums—to enhance civic literacy among adults (Cardiff University, 2005). In post-apartheid South Africa, the Department of Justice institutionalized civic learning through the community dialogues and legal awareness programmes, targeting the historically excluded populations (Wilson, 2000). These models affirm that localized, interactive, and inclusive civic education significantly increases the trust and participation outcomes acutely needed in India's fragmented democratic spaces.

India, too, has produced the powerful community-led civic education frameworks. Kerala's *Kudumbashree* Mission has demonstrated that the women's collectives, peer learning forums, and neighborhood groups can integrate civic consciousness into everyday governance—conducting voter mobilization, public grievance sessions and the sanitation drives (RGNIYD, 2019). Similarly, Rajasthan's *MKSS* used grassroots training in *social audits* to empower the rural citizens to question panchayat spending and demand transparency. The key insight is categorical as the top-down programmes alone are insufficient. The civic education succeeds when embedded in the community institutions, linked to lived experience, and reinforced through dialogical engagement. As India advances decentralization, the civic literacy must become integral to local planning, not an ancillary awareness campaign.

5.2 Designing Participatory Platforms: Juries, Dialogues, and Youth Forums

Beyond education, the citizens must have institutionalized spaces to exercise civic agency. Participatory platforms—when designed inclusively—can transform governance from a bureaucratic apparatus into a democratic common.

- **Citizens' Juries:** Adopted in the UK, Germany, and increasingly in India, these are small representative groups of the citizens who deliberate on specific policy issues and offer recommendations. Their success lies in their deliberative depth, representativeness, and policy impact.
- **Public Dialogues:** These open forums allow residents to engage with the local officials on pressing issues. Bengaluru's *Janaagraha dialogues* and Bhubaneswar's *Mo Sarkar* initiative have improved the responsiveness and reduced grievance redress time.
- **Youth Forums:** India's *Youth Parliament* and Kerala's *Student Police Cadets* integrate young people into civic processes. Beyond debating policy, these platforms train youth in collective action, ethical leadership, and rights-based engagement.

The well-designed participatory spaces must be inclusive, facilitated and linked to decision-making—to avoid tokenism, and encourage repeated engagement.

5.3 Institutional and Digital Design for Civic Trust in Kerala's Governance Landscape

The civic responsibility does not emerge in a vacuum—it flourishes in environments where institutions are trusted, services are transparent and the citizens feel heard. In India, and especially in Kerala, the effectiveness of the local self-governance has shown that institutional design can actively foster civic reciprocity. When citizens observe that grievances are redressed, budgets are accessible and the officials are ethically accountable, they are more likely to act with responsibility and community orientation. Kerala's governance ecosystem offers several such instructive models. Initiatives like *Sutharya Keralam* have strengthened the grievance redress through real-time escalation tracking and the public dashboards. The widespread use of Right to Information (RTI), open budget discussions at the ward level, and citizen-led social audits reflect a commitment to participatory governance. Importantly, public officials are expected to model civic values, echoing Rawls's idea of public reason and Sen's emphasis on ethical performance as a foundation of democratic legitimacy.

To embed civic reciprocity, the service delivery must be co-owned. Kerala's experiments in community policing, neighborhood waste management committees and the people's participatory budgeting instill a sense of mutual accountability between the state and the citizen. Simultaneously, digital tools must be harnessed for inclusive civic literacy. Apps like *MyGov*, *Swachhata App*, and Kerala's local e-governance platforms allow residents to report issues, track services, and contribute feedback. Campaigns such as #NoToPlastic and #MyCityMyBudget have mobilized urban youth, while community radio stations like *Radio Naithal* remain crucial in rural civic education.

However, the digital efforts must avoid elite capture. For equitable engagement, civic platforms must be multilingual, low-bandwidth compatible, and grounded in the local cultural idioms. Hybrid models that combine online tools with the grassroots forums and ward sabhas are essential for bridging the digital divide and sustaining democratic trust. Ultimately, rebuilding the civic-governance link in India—especially through the Kerala model—requires more than behavioral nudges. It demands systemic reengineering of institutions, participatory digital ecosystems and ethical public leadership. A civic-minded citizenry is not a passive product of the regulation, but the outcome of empowerment, visibility, and shared moral purpose.

6: CIVIC SENSE AND REFLEXIVE GOVERNANCE: TOWARDS A NEW DEMOCRATIC ETHOS

As the governance systems grow more participatory and complex, India urgently needs to transition from the compliance-driven administration to a reflexive governance ethos—a model where institutions and citizens co-create, adapt, and reflect on the democratic process. Reflexivity in governance means recognizing that the effective policy outcomes are as much about civic behaviors as institutional design. It implies a dynamic relationship between the state and society, founded on feedback, mutual accountability and ethical evolution.

The civic sense—understood as the public responsibility, empathy, and adherence to norms—must be seen as central to governance performance, not peripheral. Conventional parameters such as efficiency or service delivery overlook how deeply the public conduct affects the system's ability to function. Insights from the Dhaka study highlight how civic indifference—traffic violations, waste mismanagement, or mob violence—can overload local bodies, undermine policy uptake and erode institutional trust. Conversely, the civic-minded communities lower enforcement costs, improve collective security and facilitate better outcomes in sanitation, grievance redress, and public order.

In this context, the ethical leadership at the local level becomes foundational. Panchayat (village-level self-government unit) i Raj Institutions in Kerala offer the powerful models of civic role-modelling. When elected representatives participate in the civic training alongside citizens, uphold transparency in procurement, and model rule-compliant behavior, they help rebuild public trust and challenge institutional cynicism. As Amartya Sen (2009) notes, legitimacy stems not just from performance but from being seen as fair, accessible, and morally grounded. However, to institutionalize the civic sense, we must be able to measure it. Proposed metrics include: civic compliance scores (e.g., violation data), civic participation rates (e.g., Gram Sabha attendance), trust indices (citizen satisfaction surveys) and the behavioral surveys on rule adherence. While tools like Swachh Survekshan partially address this, India needs more robust civic indicators—similar to the OECD's Social Capital Index or the European Social Survey. These could be integrated into the local governance dashboards and public evaluation platforms, allowing real-time feedback loops that enhance transparency and accountability.

To embed this ethos systemically, India must operationalize the three pillars of civic renewal: Education, Enforcement and Engagement.

- **Education:** Embed civic learning in school and college curricula through experiential modules like civic clubs, participatory simulations, and neighborhood

parliaments and other projects. State Civic Education Boards can develop the region-specific content in partnership with local governments, and CSOs. Media literacy campaigns should counter disinformation and cultivate critical civic reasoning.

- **Enforcement:** The rule of law must be applied fairly and visibly. Local bodies can deploy trained civic marshals or community volunteers, backed by technology like AI-driven traffic monitoring and grievance redress platforms. Instead of harsh punitive measures, graded penalties and restorative practices—such as, the public apologies or community service—can promote behavioral change.

- **Engagement:** The local democracy must be deepened through institutionalized citizen forums—ward sabhas, juries, participatory budgeting councils—with the actual decision-making power. Tools like *MyGov* and civic gamification apps can increase youth participation. Importantly, these platforms must be inclusive of women, the elderly, and marginalized groups, ensuring civic spaces reflect the diversity of their communities.

Each of these pillars reinforces the others: education builds awareness, enforcement reinforces norms, and engagement sustains ownership. Ultimately, reflexive governance reframes the citizen not merely as a beneficiary or violator, but as a co-architect of democracy. It demands we view governance not as the act of delivering services, but as the collective act of building civic life. In doing so, civic sense ceases to be an aspirational virtue and becomes a functional necessity—a measurable, teachable and livable ethic that must be woven into the everyday practice of governance.

7: CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms a foundational, yet often overlooked truth; the civic sense is not merely a behavioral virtue but an epistemic pillar of democratic governance. In the Indian context, where local self-governance is constitutionally robust yet behaviourally fragmented, the quality of democracy increasingly depends on the everyday conduct of citizens and the ethical reflexivity of institutions. Civic behaviours—such as respecting public norms, participating in forums or adhering to the rule of law—are both the outcomes of governance and active ingredients in its effectiveness. Empirical evidence from Adiba Tarannum's Dhaka study, supported by Indian observations, reveals that civic sense is shaped not only by law or education but also by institutional trust, role modelling, and culturally embedded values. Age, gender, and education emerged as key determinants, with women and older citizens

consistently exhibiting higher civic compliance. Yet, systemic issues—such as fatalism, herd mentality, and lack of ethical leadership—enable widespread civic apathy. The consequence is clear: where civic norms erode, the governance collapses into transactional inefficiency and public disillusionment.

To counter this, the civic sense must be institutionalized through multi-pronged interventions: value-based civic education across age groups, enforcement systems that are fair and transparent, participatory platforms that empower citizens, and the leadership that exemplifies civic conduct. Moreover, governance metrics must evolve to include civic indicators—compliance scores, participation rates, trust indices—that reflect the lived texture of public life. From Kerala's participatory budgeting to Rajasthan's social audits, the Indian experience offers scalable models for the embedding of civic sense into governance systems. Yet, further research is essential—especially in understanding digital civic behavior, marginalized community engagement, and the institutional reflexivity mechanisms. Finally, democracy is not sustained by the structure alone, but by culture—by the civic habits, values, and the relationships that underpin public life. India's democratic resilience now rests on recognizing the civic sense not as an abstract ideal, but as a measurable, teachable, and essential infrastructure of governance.

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