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## Reinvigoration of Civic Responsibilities and National Ethos within Society

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### Abstract

*What becomes of a nation when its citizens forget the moral compass that once guided their collective destiny? Beyond the machinery of governance or economic progress, it is the intangible fabric of civic virtue and shared national ethos that sustains a society. In an era marked by the tumult of globalization, hyper-digitalization, and ideological polarization, even the most enduring democracies are witnessing the erosion of social cohesion and public spirit. The imperative to revive civic consciousness and national ethos, therefore, is not merely a matter of policy it is an existential necessity. Nowhere is this need more urgent than in India a civilization-state whose very identity rests upon the delicate equilibrium between pluralistic values and a unified national vision. From the ancient ideals of dharma that once shaped ethical public life to the participatory aspirations enshrined in the Indian Constitution, the Indian experience has long emphasized a balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities. Yet today, amidst civic apathy, growing distrust in institutions, and the commodification of patriotism, the moral foundations of the Indian republic appear increasingly fragile. This paper interrogates the contemporary attenuation of civic engagement and patriotic commitment within Indian society, contextualizing the phenomenon against a backdrop of historical legacies, socio-political transformations, and emergent global currents.*

### Keywords

Civic engagement, National identity, Social cohesion, Political participation, Public trust, Civic education, Patriotism and Ethos.

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## **Reinvigoration of Civic Responsibilities and National Ethos within Society**

### **1. Introduction**

At the heart of every thriving democracy lies the principle of civic responsibility the moral and legal duties that citizens owe not only to the state but also to each other. This responsibility encompasses a spectrum of actions, including participating in electoral processes, respecting the rule of law, contributing to community welfare, and holding public institutions accountable. As political philosopher John Stuart Mill (2018: 204) once noted, “A man who has nothing which he is willing to fight for is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.” Civic responsibility, thus, is not just about enjoying rights, but about safeguarding the institutions and values that sustain society.

Inextricably linked to civic duty is the idea of national ethos the constellation of collective values, historical narratives, and cultural traditions that imbue a nation with its unique character. National ethos acts as a unifying force, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose among citizens. In India, this ethos has historically been grounded in the principles of unity in diversity, secularism, tolerance, and collective progress, as envisioned by framers of the Constitution like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru. The spirit of Swaraj (self-rule) promoted by Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, was not merely about political independence, but about ethical self-governance and communal harmony. However, in the past few decades, both civic engagement and national ethos have suffered a marked decline in many parts of the world, including India.

Similarly, the weakening of national ethos has resulted in deepening social cleavages. Instead of serving as a source of unity, national identity is frequently weaponized for exclusionary politics, undermining pluralism. Online platforms, although potentially powerful tools for democratic participation, are often reduced to echo chambers that amplify misinformation and foster ideological rigidity. In such an environment, the bonds of citizenship grow weaker, replaced by consumer identities and transient affiliations. The situation is especially complex in multicultural societies like India,

where the balancing act between unity and diversity is constantly being tested. Given these pressing concerns, it becomes imperative to not only identify the root causes behind this civic and cultural disengagement but also to explore meaningful strategies for renewal.

## **2. Research Objectives**

This paper investigates the historical evolution, present decline, and potential revitalization of civic responsibility and national ethos in India. It examines the conceptual foundations of civic engagement and national identity, analyses the impact of political apathy, digital fragmentation, and globalization, and explores contemporary challenges such as voter disengagement and institutional distrust. Through historical case studies, social movement analysis, and ultimately, this paper argues that reasserting civic responsibility and reconstructing national ethos are essential for sustaining India's pluralistic democracy and building a more resilient and cohesive society.

## **3. Conceptual Framework: Civic Responsibility and National Ethos**

Understanding the contemporary erosion of civic engagement and national ethos requires a robust conceptual lens rooted in political theory, sociology, and cultural anthropology. In democratic societies especially complex, pluralistic nations like India civic responsibility and national ethos are not only foundational principles but essential conditions for the sustenance of constitutionalism, rule of law, and communal harmony. This section unpacks both concepts by examining their components, theoretical underpinnings, and interconnections in shaping democratic culture.

### **3.1 Defining Civic Responsibility**

Civic responsibility encompasses the duties, obligations, and ethical behaviours expected of individuals as members of a political community. It reflects the transformation of citizens from passive recipients of state benefits into proactive contributors to democratic life. In India's case, with its layered diversity and post-colonial democratic project, civic responsibility takes on multiple expressions from voting in elections to engaging in non-violent protest, from community activism to environmental stewardship. "Civic responsibility refers to the obligation of citizens to actively participate in the civic life of their community and society, including obeying

laws, respecting the rights of others, and contributing to the common good through informed and responsible actions” (Ehrlich, 2000: vi). Civic responsibility can be understood as a multidimensional construct operating through three interrelated domains:

### **3.1.1 Political Participation**

Political participation is the most visible and institutionalized form of civic responsibility. It involves electoral engagement (voting, campaigning), public discourse (deliberation, dissent), and advocacy (petitions, policy interventions). As Aristotle (1998) famously posited in *Politics*, humans are by nature *zoon politikon* political animals whose moral fulfilment lies in active participation within the civic sphere.

In modern democratic theory, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s (1963) concept of “civic culture” emphasizes that political participation is not just about formal procedures but also about the underlying psychological orientations trust, efficacy, and engagement that sustain democratic institutions. In India, political participation extends beyond formal voting to include mass mobilizations such as:

- ▶ The JP Movement (1974-75), which catalyzed public resistance against authoritarianism and directly challenged the legitimacy of Indira Gandhi’s regime.
- ▶ India Against Corruption (2011), which harnessed Gandhian methods to demand institutional reform, leading to the Lokpal Act.
- ▶ The 2020-2021 Farmers’ Protests, a sustained, largely peaceful mobilization that showed the power of collective bargaining in a democracy.

However, declining voter turnout in urban areas for instance, less than 50% in Mumbai during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections signals growing political apathy among the middle class. In contrast, rural India often shows higher turnout, revealing a paradox those with more to lose materially engage more robustly in the political process.

### **3.1.2 Social Accountability**

Social accountability refers to informal, collective mechanisms through which citizens contribute to public welfare beyond formal politics. It includes volunteering, philanthropic activity, neighbourhood cooperation, and participation in civil society organizations. Sociologist Robert Putnam’s (1993) idea of “social capital” underscores how networks of trust and reciprocity foster both

social cohesion and institutional efficiency. In India, such networks are visible in:

- ▶ The COVID-19 crisis, during which ordinary citizens mobilized to crowdsource oxygen, distribute food, and raise funds for migrant workers often faster than state mechanisms.
- ▶ Self-help groups (SHGs), especially among rural women under schemes like NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission), exemplify grassroots-level civic responsibility.
- ▶ The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, while state-driven, relied heavily on community engagement and behavioural change, making sanitation a shared social goal.

This form of civic responsibility is particularly significant in rural India, where institutions like the Panchayati Raj function as crucibles of participatory democracy. Gram Sabhas when vibrant act as forums for deliberation, local budgeting, and social auditing.

#### **4. Historical Perspectives on Civic Engagement and National Identity**

A robust national ethos has historically functioned as a cohesive force, particularly in pluralistic societies navigating complex political and cultural terrains. Civic engagement has been integral to the formation and preservation of such ethos. Across civilizations, the symbiotic relationship between civic duty and national identity has proven instrumental in times of upheaval, reform, and renaissance. This section traces the development of civic responsibility and national ethos from ancient times to modern socio-political movements, emphasizing how active citizenship has historically fortified national coherence.

##### **4.1 Ancient Civilizations and Indian Foundations**

The classical Greek city-state, or polis, stands as an early exemplar of civic engagement. In Athens, democracy flourished not merely through institutional design but through a cultural expectation of participation. Citizens deliberated in the *ekklesia* (assembly), served on juries, and held office by lot. As Pericles (1972) asserted in his Funeral Oration, “We regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as harmless, but as useless” (Thucydides, 431 BCE). Such civic ideology transformed political participation into a marker of moral virtue and social belonging.

In India, civic responsibility evolved through a complex interplay of spiritual, political, and communal values. The Indus Valley

Civilization (c. 2600-1900 BCE) displayed sophisticated urban planning granaries, public baths, and drainage systems that reflect early civic organization. The Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro may have served ritual or public health purposes, embodying communal care and hygiene.

During the Vedic period (1500-600 BCE), the Sabha and Samiti assemblies represented nascent democratic practices. They advised kings, resolved disputes, and formed early participatory governance structures. Textual references in the Rig Veda show that these assemblies were not merely ritualistic but politically engaged.

By the Mahajanapada era (600-322 BCE), republics like Vaishali and Lichchhavi institutionalized Gana-Sanghas, collective ruling bodies that emphasized consensus over autocracy. These early oligarchic republics linked civic duty with ethical governance. Epigraphic and literary sources suggest systems of communal decision-making and legal codes, anchoring civic responsibility in public discourse.

The Mauryan Empire (322-185 BCE) furthered this tradition. Emperor Ashoka's rock edicts promoted compassion, religious tolerance, and civic welfare. His appointment of Dharma Mahamatras, officials tasked with promoting moral and civic values, exemplifies the blending of governance with civic ethics. Edicts on veterinary clinics, road building, and public wells reflect tangible state-led civic responsibilities.

In the Gupta period (320-550 CE), village-level self-governance and Kudavolai systems (ballot-based selections) flourished, particularly in Tamil regions. Inscriptions from Uttaramerur document detailed qualifications for civic office, removal procedures, and committee functions, reflecting transparency and accountability.

Later, the Chola Empire (850-1279 CE) institutionalized civic life through the Ur and Sabha village councils, which managed education, irrigation, and social welfare. These bodies were based on rotation, qualifications, and community consensus precursors to modern local self-governance.

Even during the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 CE) and the Vijayanagara Empire (1336-1646 CE), civic management remained an important concern. Institutions such as Muhtasib (market inspectors), Mahadanas (charity-based endowments), and temple management councils took on public roles sanitation, fairness in trade, and social care.

Civic Institutions in Ancient and Medieval India are as follows:

- The Great Bath (Indus Valley)
- Sabha and Samiti (Vedic)
- Gana-Sanghas (Vaishali, Mahajanapadas)
- Dharma Mahamatras (Mauryan)
- Kudavolai system (Gupta/Tamil regions)
- Ur and Sabha Councils (Chola)
- Temple Management Committees (Gupta-Vijayanagara)
- Mahadanas (Vijayanagara)
- Muhtasibs (Sultanate)
- Market Committees and Mohallas (Medieval urban India)
- Rest Houses and Sarais (Mauryan to Sultanate)
- Irrigation Panchayats (Chola/Dravidian South).

These diverse yet cohesive institutions reflect an evolving civic imagination rooted in shared responsibility, ritualized ethics, and governance as public service. The integration of civic responsibility into the ethical and religious lives of individuals laid the foundation for India's future civic identity.

#### **4.2 Colonial Transformations and Regional Variations**

The colonial period marked a rupture in India's civic continuity while simultaneously laying groundwork for modern participatory politics. British rule brought new structures of governance municipalities, legislative councils, and associations often designed to serve imperial interests. Yet, Indians adapted and reconfigured these for their own civic assertions.

Municipal reforms, beginning with the Madras Corporation (1687) and formalized through the Indian Councils Act (1861) and Municipal Act (1882), introduced Indian participation, albeit limited. The Bengal Renaissance fostered civic engagement through education and media, with reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocating for rights and reason-based governance. In the Punjab, civic reform took a religious turn through the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha movements. The nationalist movement redefined civic responsibility. Gandhian campaigns like Swadeshi, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India transformed ethical living into civic duty. Institutions such as the Indian National Congress, Servants of India Society, and Anjuman-e-Islam played dual roles: resisting colonial rule and building a public consciousness rooted in civic virtue.

As Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), “Real home rule is self-rule or self-control. The way to it is passive resistance; that is, soul-force or love-force. In order to attain self-rule, we shall have to learn both to love and to hate. We shall have to love the English and hate their system. But we need not hate the English people. If we become free, India is free; and in this thought you have a definition of Swaraj. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is therefore in the palm of our hands.” This redefinition of freedom as civic self-regulation was pivotal in reshaping Indian national ethos. As Nehru (1989) reflected, “The freedom struggle was not only against foreign rule; it was also a struggle for the creation of a civil society.” These historical case studies demonstrate that civic engagement has repeatedly proven to be a stabilizing force during times of political transition.

## **5. Strategies for Reinvigorating Civic Responsibility and National Ethos**

Reinvigorating civic responsibility and a shared national ethos is essential in a time when democracies worldwide, including India, are grappling with mistrust, disillusionment, and fragmented public discourse. India, as the world’s largest democracy and one of the most diverse nations, presents both profound challenges and opportunities for fostering participatory citizenship. This section outlines comprehensive strategies across education, policy, media, and grassroots engagement each contextualized within India’s socio-political realities to re-anchor civic life in constitutional values and pluralistic identity.

### **5.1 Education Reform**

One of the foundational steps toward building a civically responsible citizenry in India is reforming its educational philosophy to include rigorous and relevant civic instruction. At present, the treatment of civics in school curricula is perfunctory, often limited to rote memorization of the Constitution’s Preamble or basic definitions of democracy. What is urgently needed is a shift to deeper, participatory models of civic learning.

Mandatory civics education should cover the structure of governance, the rule of law, electoral processes, environmental ethics, digital citizenship, and citizen rights and responsibilities. This curriculum must be dynamic incorporating current affairs, legal case studies, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Textbooks can draw from India’s own rich history of civic resistance

from the Salt March and JP Movement to the RTI campaigns and grassroots governance models like the Kudavolai system.

## **5.2 Policy Interventions**

### **5.2.1 National Service Programs**

India's demographic dividend provides a unique opportunity to institutionalize civic responsibility through national service. Unlike countries such as Israel or Singapore that mandate military service, India can adopt a non-military, civic-oriented national service model. This could take the form of a "Bharatiya Seva Yojana", a two-year voluntary but incentivized programme where youth work in public health, digital literacy, environmental protection, and local governance.

Participants could be placed in remote districts, urban slums, or disaster-prone zones, learning directly from grassroots institutions like Panchayats, Anganwadis, and Forest Committees. This would not only foster cross-regional understanding but also enhance employability through skill development. Additionally, a Public Fellowship Scheme modelled after Gandhi Fellows or Teach for India could allow graduates to work with local administration on specific mission's waste management, women's safety, school attendance and receive academic credits or stipends in return.

### **5.2.2 Incentivizing Civic Participation**

To create a culture where civic participation is seen not as sacrifice but as contribution, tangible incentives must be introduced. These can include income tax rebates for verified volunteering hours, preferential access to government scholarships, or points in public job applications. Urban local bodies and Gram Panchayats can create "Civic Leaderboards", recognizing individuals or groups who contribute consistently to community welfare. For example, Bengaluru's BBMP could publicly honour the best performing ward volunteers during festivals or sanitation drives. Government schemes like MyGov, currently used for online suggestions, can be expanded into an authenticated civic engagement index, where citizens' verified contributions are tracked and acknowledged. This gamification of public service could appeal particularly to younger populations.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Reviving civic responsibility and reconstructing a cohesive national ethos in India is not merely a matter of administrative reform is

an existential imperative for national survival in the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. In a country as diverse, complex, and digitally interconnected as India, sustaining democratic vitality requires more than formal institutions; it calls for an embedded culture of participatory citizenship and ethical nationhood. India's long history of civic engagement from the participatory models of ancient republics like Vaishali, to the moral force of Gandhian nonviolence, to the dynamic post-independence movements for justice and rights offers a profound civilizational foundation. These traditions reflect not only political activism but also a deep ethical commitment to the collective good.

Yet today, civic responsibility faces an acute erosion. Populist polarization, the shrinking of democratic and civic space, the rise of digital misinformation, economic disparities, and increasing apathy toward public life pose serious threats to India's democratic fabric. In this context, reinvigorating civic responsibility must be approached as a systemic, long-term endeavour, anchored in constitutional morality, cultural empathy, and institutional innovation. It demands that India move beyond symbolic gestures and implement structural reforms across education, governance, media, and civil society.

Ultimately, civic responsibility in India must be reimagined not simply as a duty to the state, but as a form of stewardship shared guardianship of the republic. It is a living tradition, drawing strength from India's past and adapting to the urgencies of the present. Rebuilding this ethos is not a technocratic task alone; it is a cultural, moral, and democratic project. As India navigates an era marked by rapid change and heightened uncertainty, reaffirming civic responsibility and reviving an inclusive, pluralistic national ethos is vital not just for democratic renewal, but for the integrity, unity, and resilience of the nation itself.

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