

Performative vs Practiced Citizenship: A Comparative Study of Civic Identity and Civic Behaviour Across Democracies

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary India, citizenship is often articulated through the language of rights, identity, and public expression, while its everyday practice reveals a persistent gap between assertion and conduct. This paper conceptualises this divergence as the distinction between performative citizenship and practiced citizenship. While the former denotes the symbolic assertion of belonging and entitlement, the latter reflects routine civic behaviour that sustains public order and institutional functioning.

Drawing on insights from Political Science, this study adopts a comparative framework to examine India alongside Japan and Singapore, two societies that demonstrate relatively high levels of civic compliance despite differing political and social contexts. Using a mixed-method approach that combines survey data, behavioural observation, and secondary analysis, the paper investigates how factors such as population scale, diversity, and enforcement regimes shape the relationship between civic identity and civic conduct.

The study argues that the persistence of a performative orientation in India is reinforced by low civic accountability and the normalisation of systemic blame. It concludes by proposing targeted interventions in civic education, public discourse, and behavioural policy to bridge the gap between rights and responsibilities, and to foster more consistent forms of practiced citizenship.

Introduction:

Citizenship Beyond Assertion: Understanding the Gap Between Rights and Responsibilities

Citizenship in modern democracies is often understood as a balance between rights and duties, identity and conduct, expression and obligation. **Being a citizen is not only about claiming rights, but also about fulfilling responsibilities. It is a balance between what we expect from the state and what the state expects from us.** In reality, this balance is often uneven. In India, it

is common to see people strongly aware of their rights and quick to express opinions about governance, fairness, and justice. At the same time, there is a visible gap when it comes to everyday civic behaviour, such as following rules, respecting public spaces, or taking responsibility for collective order.

This gap is not limited to political debates or social media discussions. It shows up in daily life. People may criticise the system for being inefficient or corrupt, yet casually break rules themselves. Traffic laws are ignored, public spaces are misused, and regulations are often seen as flexible rather than binding. What is more concerning is how easily this behaviour is justified. The common argument is that “the system is flawed anyway,” which then becomes a reason to not follow it. Over time, this creates a cycle where **both the system and the citizens reinforce each other’s failures.**

This paper describes this pattern as the difference between performative citizenship and practiced citizenship. *Performative citizenship is when people express their identity as citizens through opinions, emotions, and public statements, often focusing on rights and national pride. Practiced citizenship, on the other hand, is about what people actually do in their daily lives, how consistently they follow rules, respect others, and contribute to the functioning of society.* The gap between these two forms is where many of the everyday problems of governance begin.

To understand this better, it helps to look beyond India. Countries like Singapore and Japan offer interesting comparisons. In Singapore, strict enforcement and clear rules encourage people to follow civic norms. In Japan, people tend to follow rules not because they are forced to, but because it is part of their social culture. Despite their differences, both countries show a closer link between what people believe and how they behave as citizens.

By comparing these examples, this paper tries to answer a simple but important question: why do some societies practice what they preach, while others do not? It argues that the problem is not only about government systems or policies, but also about how citizens see their own role in society. If responsibilities are constantly ignored and only rights are emphasised, no system can function effectively.

In the end, the **strength of a country depends not just on its laws or leaders, but on the everyday actions of its people.** Closing the gap between what citizens say and what they do is essential if democratic systems are to work in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Conceptual Framework and Comparative Analysis

Civic Cultures in Comparison: Lessons from Japan and Singapore

Japan:

A clearer understanding of practiced citizenship emerges when we look at societies where civic behaviour is not treated as optional. In Japan, civic responsibility is deeply embedded in everyday life. Public order is maintained not merely through strict laws, but through social expectations that make compliance almost instinctive. Clean public spaces, disciplined traffic behaviour, and a high degree of mutual respect are not outcomes of constant surveillance, but of internalised norms. Citizens do not necessarily perform their identity loudly; instead, they reflect it through consistent, almost unspoken adherence to rules. Responsibility, in this sense, becomes a cultural habit rather than a legal burden.

Singapore:

In contrast, Singapore presents a model where practiced citizenship is shaped through a combination of strong enforcement and clear institutional structures. Laws are precise, penalties are certain, and governance leaves little room for ambiguity. While this compliance may initially appear externally driven, over time it contributes to a predictable civic environment where rule-following becomes normalised. Despite its diversity, Singapore demonstrates how a system can align citizen behaviour with state expectations through consistency and clarity.

In both cases, whether through internalisation as in Japan or enforcement as in Singapore, the gap between civic identity and civic conduct remains minimal.

India Case Analysis:

Selective Citizenship in India: Duties, Discipline, and Democratic Contradictions

When placed against these contexts, the situation in India reveals a more complex pattern. The Indian Constitution, under **Article 51A, lays down Fundamental Duties**, the very first of which calls upon citizens to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions. Yet, in practice, this foundational duty is often observed selectively. Rules are followed when convenient and disregarded when they appear restrictive. Civic responsibility is rarely treated as a continuous obligation; instead, it becomes situational, shaped by personal comfort rather than collective necessity.

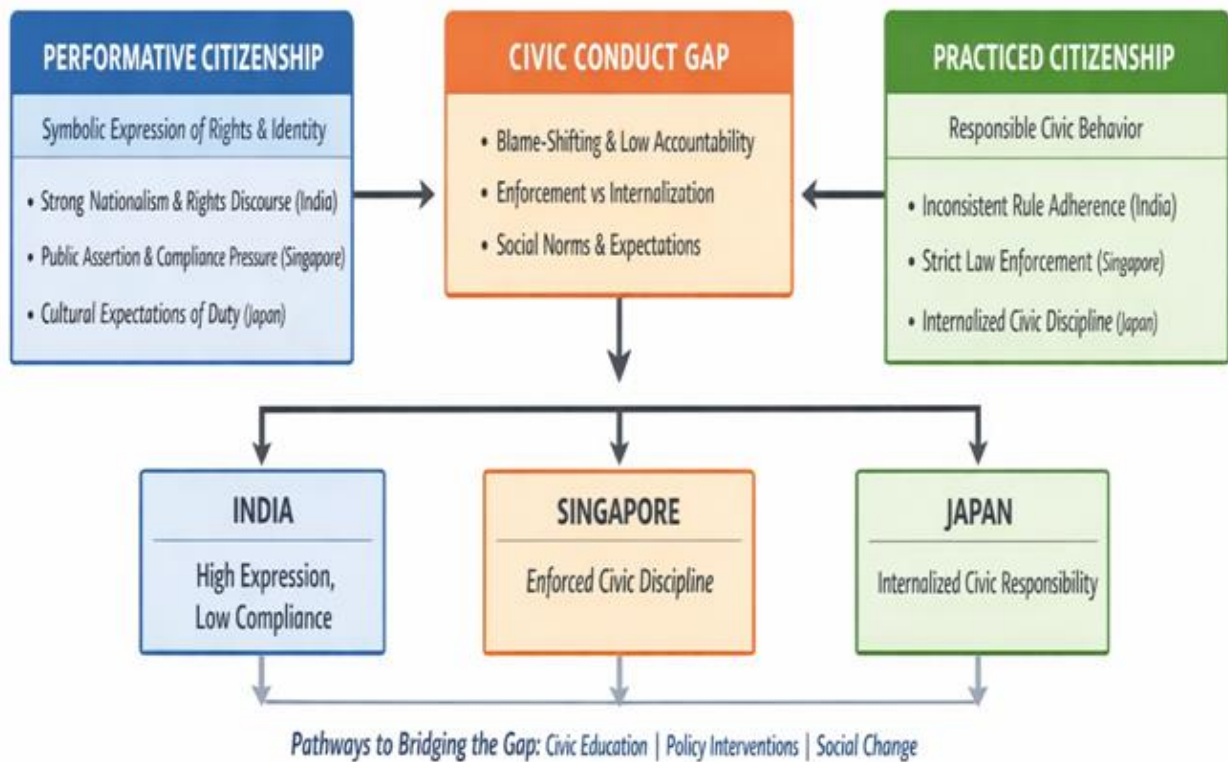
This selective approach is further reinforced by a tendency to attribute systemic failures solely to the state. Comparisons with countries like Japan or Singapore are frequently invoked to highlight India's shortcomings, often without acknowledging the vast differences in population scale, social diversity, governance complexity, and historical context. More importantly, **such comparisons tend to overlook a crucial factor**: the role of citizens themselves in sustaining

public order. To critique governance without ensuring one’s own adherence to basic civic norms reflects a contradiction that weakens the very foundation of democratic accountability.

This is not to suggest that the state is free from flaws. Issues of corruption, inefficiency, and institutional bias and more remain real and significant. However, the legitimacy of holding power accountable is strengthened, not weakened, when citizens themselves demonstrate consistency in their civic conduct. **The responsibility of a citizen extends beyond criticism**; it includes maintaining discipline, offering informed suggestions, and ensuring that personal behaviour does not contribute to the problems being criticised.

Ultimately, while the condition of a country is shaped by multiple structural factors, the role of its citizens cannot be overlooked. In a society where awareness is high but compliance is inconsistent, the gap between performative and practiced citizenship continues to widen.

Bridging this gap requires a shift from selective obedience to habitual responsibility, where duties are not seen as optional or burdensome, but as essential to the functioning of the state. For a country as complex as India, this shift is not merely desirable; it is necessary.



Explanatory Framework

Why the Gap Persists: Behavioural, Institutional, and Cultural Drivers

The persistence of a gap between performative and practiced citizenship in India cannot be explained by a single cause. It is the outcome of overlapping behavioural patterns, institutional realities, and social conditioning. To move toward meaningful reform, it is necessary to understand how and why this gap sustains itself in everyday life.

A central factor is the **normalisation of blame-shifting as a civic response**. The argument that “the system is flawed” has, over time, moved from being a critique to becoming a justification. When citizens encounter inefficiency, corruption, or administrative delay, the response is often to disengage from rules rather than to uphold them more strictly. For instance, traffic violations are routinely defended by pointing to poor infrastructure or weak enforcement. Similarly, tax evasion is rationalised by citing misuse of public funds. While these concerns may be valid in isolation, their repeated use as justification creates a cycle in which individual non-compliance contributes to the very dysfunction being criticised. In this sense, the system is not only failing citizens; citizens are also, in part, reproducing the failure of the system.

Closely linked to this is the **weak internalisation of civic duty**. Although the Constitution outlines Fundamental Duties, including the obligation to respect laws and institutions, these duties are rarely embedded as part of social habit or moral expectation. They exist more as formal knowledge than as lived practice. In contrast, in Japan, civic behaviour is reinforced through strong social norms where deviation invites disapproval, even in the absence of legal enforcement. In Singapore, consistent enforcement ensures that non-compliance carries immediate and predictable consequences. In India, however, neither social disapproval nor legal certainty operates strongly enough to make rule-following automatic. As a result, obedience becomes conditional rather than habitual, shaped by convenience rather than conviction.

Another dimension is the **coexistence of high emotional attachment to the nation with low commitment to everyday civic discipline**. Expressions of patriotism, national pride, and political opinion are widespread and often intense. However, these expressions do not consistently translate into behaviours that sustain public order. The act of identifying with the nation remains largely symbolic, visible in speech and sentiment, but less so in routine practices such as maintaining cleanliness, following regulations, or respecting shared spaces. This disjunction strengthens performative citizenship, where identity is asserted, but not necessarily enacted.

The **scale and diversity of India further complicate this dynamic**. With vast differences in language, culture, economic conditions, and regional governance, uniform enforcement and

social norms are difficult to achieve. These structural realities do place genuine constraints on governance. However, they also become convenient explanations for everyday non-compliance. The complexity of the system is often invoked to lower expectations of both governance and civic behaviour. While such complexity explains certain inefficiencies, it does not justify the normalisation of disregard for basic rules. The challenge, therefore, lies in distinguishing between structural limitation and behavioural choice.

A deeper issue underlying these patterns is the **low level of trust between citizens and institutions**. When institutions are perceived as inefficient, biased, or corrupt, citizens are less likely to feel morally bound to comply with them. Rule-following then appears less like a shared responsibility and more like a one-sided obligation. This weakens the idea of citizenship as a reciprocal relationship. However, this lack of trust also produces a paradox. As compliance decreases, institutional effectiveness further declines, reinforcing the original distrust. Breaking this cycle requires not only institutional reform but also a shift in citizen behaviour that signals willingness to participate in maintaining order.

Finally and the most dire cause is that there is a **limited culture of solution-oriented engagement**. Public discourse is often dominated by criticism, but less frequently by sustained efforts to improve systems through participation, feedback, or accountability mechanisms. The role of the citizen becomes reactive rather than constructive. In contrast, in societies where practiced citizenship is stronger, there is a clearer understanding that governance is not solely the responsibility of the state, but a shared process that requires consistent participation from citizens.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that the gap between performative and practiced citizenship in India is not accidental. It is maintained through a combination of justified criticism, habitual non-compliance, weak social enforcement, and limited civic ownership. Recognising this is essential, because it shifts the focus from assigning blame to identifying responsibility. Only when this gap is clearly understood can meaningful pathways for reform be developed, ones that address not only institutional weaknesses but also the behavioural patterns that sustain them.

Reforms:

From Awareness to Action: Reimagining Citizenship in Practice

1. Reframe Civic Education from Theory to Practice

Civic studies should be taught logically, analytically and it should move beyond textbooks and become experience-based. Students must not only learn about rights and duties but also practice

them through simulations, community work, and real-life problem-solving. Citizenship should be taught as a habit, not a chapter.

2. Make Civic Behaviour Socially Visible and Valued

Rule-following should not feel invisible. Public campaigns must highlight and normalise everyday discipline such as stopping at signals, maintaining cleanliness, and respecting queues and many more. What is seen as “normal behaviour” in society needs to shift.

3. Ensure Consistent and Predictable Enforcement

Laws lose meaning when applied selectively. Enforcement must be uniform, visible, and fair. When citizens know that violations will always have consequences, compliance becomes less about choice and more about certainty, as seen in Singapore.

4. Build Civic Responsibility Through Social Norms

Beyond legal enforcement, society itself must begin to discourage non-compliance. In cultures like Japan, social accountability plays a major role. Public disapproval of irresponsible behaviour can be a powerful tool in shaping habits.

5. Shift Public Discourse from Blame to Responsibility

Criticism of the system is necessary, but it must be accompanied by self-reflection. Media, educators, and public figures should consciously balance conversations about rights with discussions on duties and accountability.

6. Strengthen Citizen–State Trust Through Transparency

Institutions must work towards greater transparency and responsiveness. When citizens see fairness and efficiency, their willingness to comply increases. Trust cannot be demanded; it must be built.

7. Encourage Micro-Level Civic Participation

Citizens should be involved in local governance through resident associations, community initiatives, and public consultations. Participation creates ownership, and ownership leads to responsibility.

8. Link Rights with Responsibilities in Public Messaging

Every public campaign that highlights citizen rights should also clearly communicate corresponding duties. This balance must become a consistent narrative across institutions and platforms.

9. Promote Role Models of Practiced Citizenship

Instead of only celebrating success or power, society should also recognise individuals and communities that consistently demonstrate civic responsibility. Everyday discipline deserves visibility and respect.

10. Cultivate Personal Accountability as a Civic Value

At the individual level, the most immediate reform begins with self-regulation. Following rules only when convenient weakens the system. A conscious effort to maintain discipline, even in the absence of enforcement, is the foundation of practiced citizenship.

11. Encourage Solution-Oriented Citizenship

The most important of all is this. Moving beyond complaint, citizens must be encouraged to suggest improvements, report issues responsibly, and contribute to problem-solving. A functional democracy depends on active, not passive, participation.

Conclusion

Bridging the Gap: The Future of Democratic Citizenship

The idea of citizenship, at its core, is simple. It is not only about what a state guarantees to its people, but also about what people consistently contribute to the functioning of that state. This paper has argued that in India, there exists a visible gap between performative citizenship and practiced citizenship, where the assertion of rights and identity often outweighs the discipline of everyday civic conduct.

Through a comparison with Japan and Singapore, it becomes clear that the strength of a society does not lie only in its institutions or its level of development, but in the degree to which citizens align their behaviour with collective needs. Whether through internalised social norms or consistent enforcement, these societies demonstrate that civic responsibility, when practiced regularly, reduces the distance between what citizens claim and how they act.

In contrast, the Indian context reflects a more complex reality. Structural challenges such as scale, diversity, and institutional limitations are undeniable. However, the persistence of everyday non-compliance, justified through systemic critique, indicates that the problem is not only institutional but also behavioural. When duties are treated as optional and responsibility

becomes conditional, the burden on governance increases, and the effectiveness of even well-designed systems is reduced.

At the same time, this argument does not absolve the state of its responsibilities. Governments must remain accountable, transparent, and responsive. Criticism, dissent, and the questioning of authority are essential to any democracy. However, the credibility of such critique is strengthened when it is accompanied by consistent civic conduct. Accountability cannot function as a one-sided expectation; it must operate within a framework where both the state and its citizens uphold their roles.

Ultimately, the gap between performative and practiced citizenship is not irreversible. It can be narrowed through conscious effort, both at the institutional level and in everyday behaviour. The reforms discussed are not abstract ideals but practical steps toward aligning civic identity with civic conduct. They require citizens to move beyond expression and toward participation, beyond entitlement and toward responsibility.

The health of a democracy is not measured only by its laws, elections, or public debates, but by the quiet, routine actions of its people. A nation does not weaken because its citizens demand their rights; it weakens when those demands are not matched by a willingness to uphold the very system that makes those rights possible.

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