

Civic Consciousness: The Missing Pillar in Sri Lanka's Quest for Good Governance

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In every democratic society, the relationship between the state and the citizen is the cornerstone upon which stability, prosperity, and justice are built. At the heart of this relationship lies civic consciousness, the collective awareness among citizens of their rights, duties, and responsibilities toward the state and society. Civic consciousness is not merely an abstract philosophical idea; it is a living social force that shapes behavior, regulates public life, and ultimately determines whether a nation thrives or falters.

Civic consciousness can be understood as a gradual process through which individuals develop ideas about citizenship and the direction of societal development. It fosters a sense of belonging to the destiny of the nation and cultivates higher standards of social behavior. In essence, it encourages citizens to place the collective interests of society above narrow personal or group interests. This orientation toward universal values, human dignity, responsibility, and social harmony forms the moral foundation of a functioning civil society.

A strong political relationship between the state and the citizen is essential for the existence of a mature civil society. The strength of this relationship depends largely on the level of civic consciousness embedded within individuals. When citizens understand their role in safeguarding public values, civic consciousness naturally manifests itself through civic activism participation in community affairs, respect for the rule of law, and a willingness to protect shared social interests. In this sense, civic consciousness not only encourages participation but also ensures the legitimacy of socio-political institutions.

Civic consciousness is therefore more than a philosophical construct; it is expressed in everyday social life. Through norms, ideals, aspirations, and collective values, citizens define their relationship with the state and with one another. Civic interests reflecting the needs of society, groups, and individuals form a systemic framework that guides social conduct. Within this framework, citizens come to understand the meaning of civic duties, responsibility, and the ethical obligations that accompany freedom. Such awareness strengthens social cohesion and leads society toward higher levels of perfection and liberty.

Importantly, civic consciousness is not static. It remains open to new ideas, evolving with cultural change and generational shifts. Each generation inherits democratic values from the past while refining and expanding them. This organic evolution ensures that civic consciousness remains relevant and adaptable to changing social realities. However, it cannot be artificially imposed; it develops gradually through social experience, education, governance practices, and the example set by leaders.

Sri Lanka today stands at a critical moment in its democratic journey. The new political leadership has placed considerable emphasis on the concept of good governance, raising expectations among citizens both locally and internationally. The promise of

transparency, environmental responsibility, and improved living standards has generated optimism across the nation. Yet one vital element appears to have been overlooked in this reform process: the discipline and civic awareness of society itself.

Political leadership alone cannot transform a nation if the social environment that supports governance remains undisciplined or indifferent to civic norms. The institutions of law enforcement, administration, and public service are staffed by individuals drawn from society. If civic consciousness within the broader population remains weak, these institutions inevitably reflect the same weaknesses. Therefore, strengthening civic discipline within society must become a priority equal to political reform.

A visible example lies on Sri Lanka's roads. Many three-wheel drivers, bus operators, and motorcyclists behave as if public roads belong exclusively to them. Excessive honking creates unnecessary sound pollution and fosters a climate of irritation and stress among commuters. Traffic rules are frequently ignored, and law enforcement presence is often insufficient to correct these behaviors. While many citizens respect the rule of law and follow traffic discipline, a significant minority disrupts order, undermining the collective interest.

Even the deployment of traffic police requires reconsideration. In many urban areas officers are assigned to manually direct traffic during peak hours, even when signal lights are operational. This often leads to confusion and inefficiency, sometimes worsening congestion rather than alleviating it. A more effective approach would be to allow automated traffic systems to function while deploying trained officers primarily to detect and penalize violations. Such enforcement would reinforce civic discipline and deter reckless behavior.

Another area revealing the challenges of weak civic consciousness is the ongoing struggle against narcotics. The government's campaign against drugs has rightly earned the appreciation of law-abiding citizens. Yet enforcement gaps remain. For instance, new testing methods introduced to detect drug use among drivers can be circumvented when offenders substitute urine samples from non-users. In some cases, the very regulators responsible for enforcing the law become complicit in such deception. When guardians of public order abandon civic responsibility, the entire system becomes vulnerable. Public health regulation also illustrates the consequences of insufficient civic awareness.

Many restaurants and street food stalls operate under unhygienic conditions while charging excessive prices. Central government public health inspectors strive to enforce hygiene standards, yet corruption within certain local regulatory structures undermines these efforts. Street vendors frequently operate without proper sanitation; food may be handled with unclean materials or preserved with harmful chemicals to prolong shelf life. These practices not only endanger public health but also impose a long-term financial burden on the national healthcare system, which ultimately relies on taxpayers.

The misuse of chemical preservatives in food ranging from dry fish to fruits and vegetables represents another silent threat. Vendors often resort to unregulated chemical methods to avoid financial losses from unsold goods. While the economic pressure on small traders is understandable, the absence of approved preservation systems encourages

hazardous practices. A responsible regulatory framework, combined with civic awareness among vendors and consumers alike, is essential to address this challenge.

Perhaps the most concerning trend is the emergence of a segment within society that misinterprets political change as a license for lawlessness. Some individuals attempt to exploit the current political environment by intimidating law-abiding citizens or falsely claiming association with ruling political forces. Such behavior fosters fear, undermines social harmony, and erodes public confidence in governance. If left unchecked, this atmosphere may drive capable and educated citizens to seek opportunities abroad, accelerating the already troubling phenomenon of brain drain.

A significant factor weakening civic consciousness in Sri Lanka is the **misuse of religious influence in public life**. The clergy have traditionally been respected as moral leaders promoting peace, compassion, and unity. However, when some members of the clergy engage in political bias, confrontation, or hostility toward groups, they undermine the ethical foundations that sustain social harmony and civic responsibility.

This concern is intensified by sections of the media, particularly social media, that amplify such behavior through sensational coverage. By repeatedly highlighting disruptive actions of a few individuals, the media risks normalizing disorder rather than encouraging accountability.

These developments mirror a broader erosion of civic discipline in society, visible in everyday issues such as traffic indiscipline, poor public cleanliness, and corruption in local administration. Addressing this decline requires impartial law enforcement, stronger institutional integrity, and an education system that cultivates responsible citizenship and reinforces civic values.

Civic consciousness demands that the interests of the entire nation take precedence over the ambitions of individuals or groups. When this principle is ignored, social order deteriorates and governance reforms lose their impact. For Sri Lanka to achieve the aspirations associated with good governance, political leaders, administrators, and citizens must collectively reaffirm the values of discipline, responsibility, and respect for law.

A robust vetting system within public institutions is essential to identify individuals who abuse authority or engage in corruption. Those proven guilty of serious misconduct must face firm and decisive consequences. Such accountability is not an act of punishment alone; it is a necessary step toward preserving public trust and reinforcing civic values.

At the same time, civic education must become a national priority. Schools, universities, media institutions, and community organizations should actively promote awareness of civic duties. Citizens must understand that democracy does not merely grant rights; it also imposes responsibilities to obey the law, respect fellow citizens, protect public resources, and contribute to social harmony.

Embedding Civic Consciousness in Education: Lessons for Sri Lanka

If Sri Lanka is to cultivate a disciplined and responsible society, civic consciousness must begin not in adulthood but in the classroom. The most sustainable

way to strengthen civic values is through a deliberate inclusion of civic consciousness within the national education curriculum. A comprehensive review of school syllabi should therefore prioritize civic education as a foundational subject, one that shapes the moral character, discipline, and social responsibility of future generations.

Education is the most powerful instrument for shaping social behavior. When young citizens are systematically taught the meaning of responsibility toward society, respect for law, environmental awareness, and mutual respect for fellow citizens, these values gradually become part of the national culture. Civic consciousness then ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes a lived reality in everyday conduct on roads, in public spaces, in institutions, and within governance itself.

Several nations demonstrate how education can transform civic behavior and social discipline. The experiences of Japan, Singapore, and China illustrate how structured civic education, combined with consistent enforcement of rules, can produce highly disciplined societies.

In Japan, civic responsibility is deeply embedded in the education system from an early age. Students participate in activities that teach responsibility toward the community, including maintaining cleanliness in classrooms and public spaces. These practices instill the belief that public property belongs to everyone and therefore must be respected and protected. The result is a society where discipline and mutual respect are not enforced solely through law but sustained through shared social values.

Singapore offers another powerful example. Through civic education and strict enforcement of public order, the country has cultivated a culture where citizens naturally respect rules related to cleanliness, transport, and public behavior. The emphasis on social responsibility in schools ensures that discipline becomes a personal value rather than merely an imposed obligation.

Similarly, China has long emphasized civic duty and collective responsibility within its educational framework. Civic instruction there promotes the idea that national progress depends on the disciplined conduct of every individual citizen. Through consistent messaging and structured education, civic responsibility becomes intertwined with national identity and social stability.

These examples demonstrate a common principle: **discipline in society begins with disciplined education.** When civic consciousness is taught systematically, citizens begin to internalize the idea that violating rules is not merely a legal offense but a social disgrace. A healthy society is one in which individuals feel **shame in breaking rules and guilt in violating civic responsibilities.**

Equally important is the role of social accountability. In societies with strong civic consciousness, citizens themselves become guardians of public order. When uncivil or irresponsible behavior occurs whether reckless driving, littering, or violation of public rules others express clear disapproval. Such social reactions create a moral environment in which offenders recognize their actions as unacceptable. This collective moral pressure is often more powerful than legal punishment alone.

Sri Lanka can benefit immensely by integrating these principles into its education system. Civic education should not remain limited to theoretical lessons about democracy

or constitutional rights. Instead, it should involve **practical civic training** respecting traffic laws, protecting the environment, maintaining cleanliness in public places, and understanding the responsibilities that accompany freedom.

Schools should therefore become training grounds for responsible citizenship. Students must learn that their behavior affects the wellbeing of the entire community. When these values are consistently reinforced from childhood, they eventually shape the conduct of society at large.

For Sri Lanka, which aspires to strengthen good governance and social discipline, embedding civic consciousness within the national curriculum could become one of the most transformative reforms of the modern era. A generation raised with a deep sense of civic duty will naturally respect institutions, support lawful governance, and contribute to national development.

In the long run, a nation's progress is not determined solely by its economic policies or political leadership. It is determined by the **character of its citizens**. By nurturing civic consciousness through education, Sri Lanka can lay the foundation for a disciplined, responsible, and harmonious society one where citizens not only obey the law but also feel morally compelled to uphold it.

The journey toward a disciplined and enlightened society cannot be achieved overnight. Civic consciousness evolves gradually through collective effort and shared commitment. Yet history demonstrates that nations which cultivate strong civic values ultimately achieve greater stability, prosperity, and unity.

Sri Lanka possesses the cultural heritage, intellectual capacity, and democratic institutions necessary to build such a society. What is required now is a renewed emphasis on civic consciousness as the moral compass of national progress. Only when citizens, administrators, and political leaders alike internalize this principle will the promise of good governance truly transform the society.

Conclusion and Author Attribution

The erosion of civic consciousness in Sri Lanka is not merely a matter of declining discipline in public behavior; it reflects a deeper institutional, social, and moral imbalance that has gradually developed over time. Despite the country's high literacy rate and long-standing cultural traditions that value respect, tolerance, and communal harmony, several structural factors, including political manipulation of vulnerable social segments, misuse of authority, the politicization of religious influence, and irresponsible media amplification have contributed to the weakening of civic values within society. Rebuilding civic consciousness therefore requires a multidimensional national effort.

Governance must be strengthened through impartial law enforcement and institutional accountability, while the education system must deliberately cultivate civic responsibility and ethical conduct from an early stage. Equally important is the need for responsible public leadership, political, religious, and social, that promotes unity,

discipline, and respect for the rule of law. Only through such collective commitment can a society restore the moral foundations that sustain a stable and progressive civil order.

The **conceptual framework and analytical interpretation presented in this paper are originally developed and written by R/Admiral(Retd) J. J. Ranasinghe**, whose work examines the causes of declining civic consciousness in the Sri Lankan context and proposes pathways for strengthening civic discipline, institutional integrity, and responsible citizenship. This attribution is provided so that scholars, policymakers, and researchers interested in the subject may trace the intellectual foundation of this analysis and engage with it in further academic or policy discourse.