



Civic Responsibility

Life Skills for Modern India — Manual 9

A Clear Thinking Bharat™ Micro-Manual

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Preface

Civic responsibility is often discussed in terms of voting, laws, constitutional duties, public service or patriotism. All of those matter. But much of civic life happens in smaller and less formal ways.

It happens when we deal with other people, use shared spaces, disagree with one another, encounter public institutions, decide whether to speak up, pass along information, or choose between getting what we want now and preserving something useful for later.

This manual grew from a simple question: what principles might help ordinary people think through those situations without trying to prescribe how a “good citizen” should behave in every circumstance?

The result is deliberately practical. It does not assume that government can solve every problem, or that citizens can. It does not assume that every custom is good, every formal process works as intended, or every disagreement can be resolved. Nor does it ask people to take unreasonable risks in order to demonstrate civic virtue.

Instead, it offers a small set of questions and habits of thought that may help us live together a little better in a large, complicated and changing country.

As with the other Clear Thinking Bharat manuals, the aim is not to provide all the answers. It is to help us ask some useful questions before deciding what to do.

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Thanks are also due to the public institutions and independent organizations whose information and resources are listed in Appendix A. Their work makes it easier for citizens to understand and use the institutions available to them.

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I. Why Civic Responsibility Matters

We often talk about a country as if it were something apart from the people who live in it. India should be cleaner. Roads should be safer. Government should work better. There should be less corruption, less strife, more trust, more growth. And when we think about who has to change to make these things happen, the answer is often somebody else: politicians, officials, businesses, young people, old people, another community, our neighbors, or just “society.”

There is a simple problem with that way of thinking. Countries change and get better when their people get better. *They do not change and get better if their people do not.*

Government matters, of course. So do laws, courts, schools, good leaders, sound rules, jobs, roads, and all the other parts of a working country. Some problems are far too large for one person, or even a group of people, to fix. It would be silly to pretend otherwise.

But all those things are still part of a society made up of people. People vote for governments, work in offices, run businesses, teach children, enforce laws, break laws, follow rules, bend rules, help strangers, cheat strangers, keep promises, spread rumors, look after common property, and sometimes decide that common property is somebody else’s problem. Do these things often enough, and they become part of what the country is like.

There is another way to put it. Every one of us is somebody else’s “other people.”

Yes, gentle reader. That means you.

It means all of us. None of us can fix India by being a model citizen for a week. That is not the point. The point is that we take part, every day, in making the kind of society in which all of us have to live.

What are we trying to achieve?

There is no perfect society at the end of this road. People want different things and will go on wanting different things. We disagree about politics, religion, money, development, language, culture, and a good many other matters. Even two decent and well-informed people can look at the same problem and want different answers.

So the aim cannot be to make everybody agree. A more useful aim is a country that is stable enough to work, harmonious enough that people can live together, and open enough to grow and change. Stability does not mean freezing things as they are. A society that cannot correct mistakes is not very stable in the long run.

Nor can a country promise happiness. People have to find or create much of their own happiness, but the way a society works can make that easier or harder. Needless delay, distrust, disorder, hostility, fear, and constant friction wear people down. When those are reduced, people have more room to get on with their own lives.

We also have to think beyond today. Roads, institutions, water, public spaces, habits, knowledge, social trust, and even the way we treat one another are handed on. We inherited a country from people before us. At some point, we hand it over to a future generation.

What this manual is — and is not

This is not a book about personal morality. Most of us already have some sense of right and wrong, drawn from family, religion, culture, philosophy, education, experience and, one hopes, some thought of our own. We will not always agree, and this manual is not going to settle those disagreements.

It will not try to settle the hardest religious or ideological conflicts either. Nor are we going to work out when rebellion, revolution, or resistance to authority might be justified. Those are much larger questions.

The question here is more everyday life. Given that we are different, how do we live together reasonably well? We use the same roads, water, public offices, courts, markets, schools and other institutions. We run into one another all day. We have common problems whether we like one another or not. And, somehow, we have to disagree without turning every disagreement into a serious conflict or war.

We are not going to make a long list of what a good citizen must and must not do. We will mostly work with a few principles, questions and examples. The examples are there to help us think, not to settle every case. Real life has a habit of producing the case the rule writer did not think of.

II. Country, State, Government — and the Citizen

Three words will come up often in a discussion like this: country, State, and government. In everyday talk we mix them together. Usually that causes no harm, but the difference matters here. For our purposes, we will use the words in the following general sense.

The *country* is India in a very broad sense: the land, the people, the history, the many cultures and traditions, the institutions, and the shared life that continues from one generation to the next. No government owns all of that.

The *State* is narrower. It is the lasting structure of public authority — the constitutional and legal system through which laws are made, carried out and enforced, disputes are decided, and public duties are performed. We use a capital S for State in this sense. An Indian state such as Tamil Nadu or Punjab gets the ordinary lower-case word.

The *government* is the part that changes more often. One government wins an election, another loses; ministers come and go; policies change. The State carries on through those changes. And the country is larger than either the State or the government of the day.

This is not just a matter of neat definitions. It lets us think more clearly. You can criticize a government and still care deeply about the country. You can say that a police force, court, ministry, municipality, or other State body is doing something badly without wanting to tear down the State. And loving one's country does not require loving the party in office. Those things are quite different.

Who does what?

We do not need a civics textbook here, but it helps to know the rough map.

Legislatures make laws. The political executive and the civil administration carry them out and run public services. Courts decide disputes and interpret and apply the law. Police and other law-enforcement bodies deal with public order and enforcement under the law. The armed forces defend the country. Bodies such as the Election Commission and other constitutional or statutory agencies have their own set tasks. Panchayats, municipalities and other local bodies handle many of the matters we meet close to home. These are the *instruments* of the State.

The real system is much more tangled than that. Still, knowing the rough map can save a lot of wasted effort. If a drain is blocked, a pension has not arrived, a road is dangerous, a government record is wrong, or somebody has broken the law, it helps to know who can actually do something about it. Shouting at the wrong office may feel like action. It is usually just shouting at the wrong office.

Citizenship is bigger than dealing with government

There is also a trap in thinking of civic life only as a matter between the citizen and government. We pay taxes, government provides services, and we complain when the services fail. That is part of the picture, but only part.

Much of civic life takes place between people who have no government role at all. Neighbors share a street. Passengers share a bus or train. People work in firms, schools, hospitals, shops, temples, mosques, churches, charities, clubs, resident groups and professional bodies. Families teach children how to deal with other people long before a civics class does. News and social media can calm a quarrel or spread it.

The same is true of common resources. A public park, road, lake or building may be run by government, but citizens use it. Its condition depends partly on what the public authority does and partly on what people do to it.

And not every solution to a local problem has to begin with “the government should...” Sometimes that is exactly where it should begin. At other times a few people can fix a small problem, organize help, tell the right authority what is wrong, or simply stop making the problem worse.

A citizen, then, is not just a person who obeys the State, and not just a customer waiting for government service. We have rights and lawful claims on government. We also live among other people, use things that belong to all of us, and take part in the habits that make society work — or not work.

III. How Societies Actually Work

Most of daily life runs without an enforcement officer

Suppose every small act of daily life needed a written rule and somebody standing nearby to enforce it. We would need an army of officials just to get through the morning.

Most of the time, that is not how life works. People stand in a queue because there is a queue. We expect a borrowed thing to be returned. We usually do not park across somebody's gate just because no policeman is watching. At night we turn the volume down a little. We let another person pass. We keep a simple promise. None of this is heroic. That is precisely why it matters.

Civilization works because millions of people follow hundreds of unwritten expectations every day. Some are backed by law, many are not, and even the ones that are backed by law cannot be watched every minute. No police force can stand beside every citizen.

When these small expectations work, life is easier and takes less effort. If a simple promise means nothing, we need more checking. If nobody respects a queue, somebody has to control it. If people keep damaging a shared place, money has to be spent guarding and repairing it. We all end up paying, in money, time, irritation, or some mix of the three.

That is why "Is it illegal?" is not always enough of a civic test. Something can be not illegal and still make life worse for everyone if it becomes common practice. A useful second question is: what happens if everybody does this?

But "everybody does it" does not make it right

There is a catch. Unwritten rules are not always good rules.

A practice can be old, common, and strongly defended by a community and still be unfair. It may shut some people out, favor the powerful, put an unfair burden on one group, or simply have outlived the reason it began. "This is how we have always done it" tells us that a custom exists. It does not tell us that the custom is worth keeping.

So, judgment is needed both ways. Sometimes being a good citizen means going along with a useful custom that makes life easier for everyone. Sometimes it means not going along with a bad one. And sometimes it means helping to change what people have come to expect if you are in a position to do so.

Labels do not help much. Traditional is not the same as good. Modern is not the same as good. Formal and informal practices can each be sensible or foolish. Better to ask what the practice does: is it broadly fair, does it let people live together in peace, and does it respect the basic rights of others?

Small things become big when everybody does them

One person jumping a queue is an annoyance. If everybody expects to push ahead whenever there is an opening, the queue itself stops working.

One person getting a small favor because he knows somebody in an office may look harmless. But if people come to believe that rules are for those without connections, trust in the rule — and in the office — starts to go.

The reverse works too. If people usually keep their word, respect a queue, leave a shared place usable for the next person, and expect ordinary rules to apply without a fight, daily life becomes easier. Nobody has to be a saint. Enough people just have to be reasonably dependable often enough.

This is how a small act can become part of a large system. The act itself may be trivial. The habit, repeated a million times, can have a large impact.

Sometimes you may be early

There will be times when the better way of doing something is not yet the usual way.

You may be the one who checks a story before forwarding it, waits when others are pushing ahead, refuses to join a nasty pile-on, or treats an unknown person with a little more care than the situation seems to demand. Perhaps nobody notices. Perhaps somebody laughs at you for being fussy.

That is all right. Social habits do not change because somebody announces that they have changed. They change when enough people start doing something different and, after a while, the new behavior no longer looks odd. Today's unusual courtesy can become tomorrow's expected courtesy.

This does not mean you must pay any price for the sake of setting a civic example. That would be a poor rule. Some situations involve power, money, jobs, family pressure, or real personal risk. We will come to those later.

For now, there is just one point to keep in mind. Society is not something being made somewhere else by “other people.” We are making bits of it ourselves, all the time.

IV. Practical Civic Judgment in Everyday Life

Principles are more useful than a long list of rules

It would be easy to fill this manual with small instructions. Do this in a queue. Do that on a bus. Do not do this at a public office. Behave this way with a neighbor. Apart from being tiresome, such a list would fail as soon as life produced a situation we had not put on the list.

A few questions are more useful and help create long-lasting habits. Is this fair? What am I trying to accomplish? What happens if everybody does this? Am I asking of others what I would accept for myself or my own group? What will this look like from the other side? And what happens later, after today's problem is over?

These questions will not always give the same answer. That is why judgment is needed. Civic responsibility is not a machine into which we put a problem and receive the approved answer.

Nor does every small mistake become a civic failure. People are impatient, distracted, tired, angry and sometimes simply thoughtless. The point is not to inspect every act for moral purity. It is to develop habits of thought that make needless harm and friction a little less likely.

Shared things are still ours

Public property has an odd disadvantage: everybody owns it, so it can feel as though nobody owns it.

A road, park, lake, bus, railway station, government building or patch of common land may be maintained by a public body, but the public uses it and ultimately bears much of the cost when it is damaged or misused. The same idea applies to water and other resources that many people must share.

Consider a simple example. A family may keep its own house and yard spotless by putting its rubbish on an empty plot nearby. The private space is clean. The problem has merely been moved to everybody else.

This is a useful civic test because it appears in many forms: have I solved my problem, or have I just handed the cost to someone else?

We need not turn this into a lecture about litter or the environment. The larger point is that shared things do not stop being ours because the ownership is spread among millions of people.

Know enough before you speak — and more before you advocate or prescribe

Nobody can study every public issue in depth. Nor should ordinary people have to become experts before they are allowed an opinion.

But there is a difference between having an opinion and having an informed opinion. Before speaking strongly about an issue, it is worth knowing the basic facts. What happened? What do we actually know from good sources? What is only alleged? Is there another side to the story?

If you want other people, a community, or a government to adopt a particular solution, you should know a little more before proposing. What would the proposed change do? What might it cost? What else could be done? Who would bear the unwanted effects? What happens if the solution does not work as expected?

The stronger the action we want others to take, the better we should understand the issue. The language we use matters too. Heated language can turn an ordinary disagreement into a more serious conflict, and threatening language can change the nature of the matter altogether.

There is also nothing shameful about saying, “I don’t know enough about this to have a useful opinion.” On some subjects that may be the most informed thing we can say.

The street does not end when we go online

A large part of public life now takes place on a screen. The people on the screen are still people, and what happens there can spill very quickly into homes, schools, workplaces, streets and communities.

Before forwarding a claim on social media or email that could harm someone or inflame a dispute, make a reasonable effort to find out whether it is true. A report, an allegation, an opinion and a fact are not the same thing. “Forwarded as received” does not make the sender disappear and can still have a negative impact.

The same applies to joining an online mob. A hundred people each adding one insult may feel like a hundred small acts. To the person at the other end, it is one large event.

There is much more to say about online safety, fraud, privacy and the careful use of social media, but those are subjects for the Digital Safety manual (if you are interested, see ClearThinkingBharat.org for related manuals). The civic point here is enough: going online does not suspend our responsibility for what we do to other people.

V. Dealing with Problems, Institutions, and Other People

What are you trying to accomplish?

Something has gone wrong. A service has failed. An office has delayed something. A neighbor has caused a problem. An employee has been rude. A rule has been applied badly. You are angry, and perhaps you have every reason to be.

Before deciding what to do, ask one question: what are you trying to accomplish?

If the answer is “I want them to know how angry I am,” shouting may work very well. If the answer is “I want this corrected,” a different approach may work better.

That does not mean being meek. Some problems need a firm complaint. Some need evidence, repeated follow-up, a written record, an appeal, or a higher authority. Occasionally somebody needs to be told, quite plainly, that what is happening is unacceptable.

The point is to choose the action for the result you want. Anger can tell us that something matters. It is not always a good guide to what we should do next.

There is a longer view too. If you will have to deal with the same office, neighbor, school, business or group again, do not damage tomorrow’s working relationship merely for the pleasure of winning today’s argument.

There is a human being at the other end

An institution can hide the human being inside it. We deal with a clerk, constable, official, guard, driver, customer-service worker or employee, and for a few minutes we think only of the person’s role, rather than the human being in it.

It is worth remembering that the person at the other end has a life too, and may be having a bad day. He or she may be somebody’s parent, daughter, brother, friend or neighbor. In another setting we might speak to the same person quite differently.

This is not a rule that officials must be treated gently at all times. A person can be dishonest, abusive, lazy, obstructive or simply wrong. Such conduct may need to be challenged or reported.

But we can challenge the person’s action without forgetting we are dealing with another human being. It is the decent thing to do, and it often works better.

Not every encounter is between equals

There is another side to this that should not be hidden behind advice about courtesy. A citizen dealing with an institution, employer, police officer, local official or powerful person may not have as much power as the other side.

The cost of a confrontation may be delay, trouble at work, social pressure, harassment, or something more serious. The risk will depend greatly on the situation. It is easy for someone

safely outside it to say, “Stand up and fight.” The person inside it has to live with what happens next.

Do not put yourself at unreasonable risk merely to prove that you are a good citizen.

Find out whom you are dealing with and what authority that person has. Keep records when they may matter. Ask for help if help is available. Another office, a written complaint, a senior person, a lawyer, an association, a trusted intermediary or simply returning at a better time may accomplish more than a face-to-face fight.

There are also times when walking away is the sensible choice. Civic responsibility does not require martyrdom.

Reporting a problem should not become a new problem

A society needs people to report dangerous roads, broken public works, wrongdoing, abuse, corruption and other problems. Yet people will naturally hesitate if reporting something means weeks of calls, repeated visits, unwanted attention, or being pulled into a matter long after they have given the useful information.

Good public systems should make responsible reporting easy, safe and reasonably finite. A person should be able to tell the right body what he or she knows, provide useful information, and ordinarily get on with life.

Citizens have a part to play too. Report to a place that can actually act. Say what happened as clearly as possible. Separate what you saw from what you heard. Keep evidence when it matters. Do not turn a report into a campaign unless the matter truly calls for one.

India has, in some areas, already recognized the value of reducing the burden on people who step forward. We will point to the relevant current resources later rather than put changing procedures here (see Appendix A).

The formal way and the way things actually get done

Anyone who has dealt with a large organization knows that the written process and the way work actually moves are not always the same thing.

The sensible starting point is to understand the proper process and seriously try to use it. Do not assume from the beginning that rules are useless or that everything requires influence.

At the same time, not every informal step is corrupt. Asking a friend which counter handles a matter, finding someone who knows how an office works, using a community elder to settle a small dispute, or asking a person with experience whom to speak to may simply be practical navigation.

The useful line is between navigating the system and exploiting it. Help in finding the right door is one thing. Using power or connections to get an unfair result, jump a legitimate requirement, or push the cost onto somebody else is another.

There will be harder cases. A system may be so entrenched that the proper path has little chance of working, while the matter at stake is important and cannot simply be abandoned. An individual cannot be expected to repair the whole system before getting on with life.

In such cases, understand the proper route first, make a serious effort to use it, and then use judgment about what is realistically possible. This manual does not advise illegal conduct. It will also not pretend that every imperfect system can be cured by one citizen insisting that it behave perfectly.

Sometimes the lasting answer has to come from above: a changed rule, simpler process, better technology, different incentives, stronger supervision, or political action. While individual conduct matters, institutions have responsibilities too.

VI. Disagreement, Loyalty, Compromise, and Change

Use the same judgment on your own side

Most of us see faults more easily when they belong to somebody else.

Politics makes this obvious, but the habit is much wider. We excuse conduct by our family, religion, language group, region, profession, party or community that would anger us if another group did the same thing.

A useful civic habit is to turn the case around. If the other side did this, what would I say? If I would call it dishonest, unfair or dangerous then, why is it acceptable now?

This does not require pretending that every side is equally right or equally wrong. They may not be. It means using roughly the same measuring stick.

And when our own side is wrong, criticism does not always have to begin with a public attack. A quiet word may fix something without forcing people to defend themselves in front of an audience. At other times the problem is serious, private efforts have failed, or the public needs to know. Then public criticism may be the right choice.

Again, the question is not “Which form of criticism looks bravest?” It is “What are you trying to accomplish?”

Look for the cause, not just the culprit

When something goes badly, finding a person to blame can be satisfying. Sometimes a person really is to blame. But blame by itself does not tell us how to stop the same thing happening again.

Was the problem one careless person? A bad rule? A reward for the wrong behavior? Poor training? Missing information? A custom everyone follows even though nobody thinks it works? Several of these at once?

If the same failure keeps appearing under different people, changing the person may not be enough.

The useful civic question is what can be changed so that the next result is better. Sometimes that change can happen quickly. Sometimes pushing too fast creates a backlash or a new problem. There is no general rule for the right speed. Change something, watch what happens, and be willing to think again.

Compromise is not a defect in society

No large country can give every person exactly what he or she wants. India certainly cannot. There are too many people, needs, beliefs, histories, languages, interests and ways of life.

Living together therefore requires compromise. That word sometimes sounds like weakness: if a principle matters, why compromise? But many civic disputes are not contests between good and evil. They are clashes between two legitimate wants that cannot both be fully satisfied.

It helps to distinguish “I dislike this” from “I cannot reasonably live with this.” A great deal of civic life lies in the space between those two statements.

There are limits. Some disputes involve basic rights, deep religious beliefs, identity, conscience, or questions people regard as fundamental. This manual is not going to tell people what they must believe or how every such conflict should end.

It can still say something about how the conflict is carried on. Deep belief does not require violence, physical intimidation, deliberate destruction, or stripping basic rights from other citizens. We may not be able to settle the belief. We still have to share the country.

Law is the normal framework

In ordinary civic life, obey the law. If a law is bad, work to change it through the political, legal and constitutional means available.

That may mean voting, writing, organizing, petitioning, going to court, supporting a campaign, speaking to representatives, or helping persuade other citizens. A democracy gives people many ways to argue about the rules without first breaking them.

There are old and difficult questions about unjust laws, civil disobedience, rebellion and resistance to authority. They have occupied philosophers, religious thinkers and political movements for centuries. We do not need to solve them in order to talk about normal civic responsibility.

So, we will leave them where we left them earlier. This is not a “How to Rebel” manual.

VII. Civic Courage, Maturity, and Social Cost

The same action cannot be expected from everyone

It is easy to write, “Speak up when something is wrong.” Life is not always that simple.

A school student whose whole social world is a group of friends may go along with something he knows is foolish. A university student may be able to say, “I’m not doing that.” A person with a job, savings, experience and a settled sense of self may be able to challenge the practice openly, persuade others, or organize an effort to change it.

These are not fixed stages, and age by itself proves very little. The point is that independence, confidence, knowledge and position affect what a person can reasonably do.

Sometimes the first civic act is simply not joining in.

There are many ways to act

Speaking loudly is only one form of courage. A quiet refusal can matter. So can a private conversation, a written record, a report, a public statement, helping somebody else speak, joining with others, or taking the lead when nobody else will.

Which one is right depends on the problem, the person, the likely result and the cost.

A useful rough path might be: follow, politely decline, speak, advocate, organize, lead. It is not a ladder that every person is supposed to climb. Sometimes quietly declining is exactly the right answer. Sometimes leadership is needed.

The aim is not to perform courage. It is to do what the situation reasonably calls for.

Courage is cheap when someone else pays for it

We should be especially careful about demanding courage from other people. The same action can also carry very different costs for different people. What is a minor inconvenience for one person may put another person’s job, family support, social standing or safety at risk.

It is easy to tell a worker to confront an employer, a young person to defy a family, a villager to challenge a powerful local figure, or a citizen to fight an official. The advice costs the adviser nothing. The other person may bear the loss of a job, family support, standing in the community, money, time, safety, or peace of mind.

That does not mean nobody should ever take such risks. Many worthwhile changes have required people to accept a cost. But the cost is real, and the person who bears it has a large say in deciding whether and when to accept it.

Do not demand courage cheaply from someone else.

Greater capacity can mean greater responsibility

The other side of this is that our ability to help can grow.

A person with knowledge can explain. A person with standing can speak when others may not be heard. Someone with money can support useful work. A senior person can protect a junior one. A person who understands a system can help others find their way through it. Someone with time can organize.

None of this makes one person more worthy than another. It simply means that people have different tools at different times in their lives.

As our freedom, knowledge, standing or resources grow, it is worth asking whether some of that added capacity can be used beyond ourselves. Not every time. Not for every cause. But sometimes.

That too is part of civic responsibility.

VIII. Participation and Practical Pathways

Civic participation does not begin and end with voting

Voting matters. It is one of the clearest ways citizens take part in choosing who will exercise public power. But an election comes only occasionally, while civic life goes on every day.

Participation can be much smaller and closer to home. It may mean attending a local meeting when an issue matters, helping a residents' group, volunteering, giving useful information to an authority, supporting a worthwhile local effort, writing to a representative, helping someone understand a public process, or simply taking responsibility for a problem instead of assuming somebody else will.

Not everybody has to be active in everything. A country of more than a billion people does not need more than a billion full-time activists. People have work, families, studies, health, money and other responsibilities. The point is not constant participation. It is being willing to take part when there is a good reason and when you can usefully do so.

Start with the level where the problem lives

Many civic problems are easier to understand once we ask where they actually belong.

A broken streetlight, blocked drain or local waste problem may belong first with a municipality, panchayat or other local body. A problem with a government service may have a department, grievance process or appeal. A larger policy question may belong with elected representatives, a court, a regulator, or public debate.

Starting at the right level does not guarantee success, but starting at the wrong one wastes time. Before launching a campaign against “the government,” it may be worth finding out which part of government can actually fix the problem.

The same principle applies outside government. A problem in an apartment building may belong first with the residents. A workplace problem may have an internal route. A neighborhood may be able to solve something with a few willing people. Use the smallest level that can reasonably deal with the matter, and move outward when that level cannot.

Use the tools that already exist

Citizens do not have to invent a new method every time something goes wrong. India already has institutions and channels for voting, obtaining government information, making complaints, seeking remedies, volunteering and taking part in public life.

Some of these procedures change over time, and they differ between the Union, states and local bodies. For that reason, this manual will not reproduce pages of instructions that may soon be out of date. The resource section at the end points to official places where current information can be found.

Knowing that a tool exists is often enough to begin. You do not need to memorize the Right to Information process before you need information, or every grievance mechanism before you have a grievance. You need to know that there are lawful routes and where to look when the need arises.

And sometimes the best tool is simply another person who knows the system better than you do. Asking for help is not a failure of civic independence. It is often how people learn to use institutions.

Participation works better when it is specific

“Something must be done” is not yet a plan.

If you want a problem fixed, it helps to be able to say what the problem is, where it is, what you know about it, who may be able to act, and what you are asking that person or body to do. A photograph, date, location, document or short factual account can sometimes do more than a page of outrage.

The same applies when asking other citizens to help. “We should improve our neighborhood” is easy to agree with. “Can six of us meet on Saturday morning and work out how to get this dangerous crossing reported to the right authority?” gives people something they can actually do. (In practice, be specific as to time and place of meeting.)

Large change often begins with a problem stated clearly enough that somebody can take the next step.

Work with others when the problem calls for it

Some civic problems are too large, persistent or politically difficult for one person. That is one reason people form associations, volunteer groups, professional bodies, charities, campaigns and other organizations.

Working with others can bring knowledge, numbers, money, standing and persistence that one person does not have. It can also make it easier to share the cost and risk of speaking up.

But a group does not automatically acquire good judgment merely because it is a group. Groups can become angry, careless with facts, captured by a few loud voices, or more interested in defeating an opponent than solving the problem.

The same questions still apply. What are we trying to accomplish? Do we know the facts? Is the proposed action likely to help? What might it damage? Are we treating people outside our group by standards we would accept for ourselves?

Collective action is powerful. That is a reason to use it carefully, not a reason to avoid it.

You can contribute without becoming a public figure

Civic contribution is sometimes pictured as speeches, campaigns and leadership. Much of it is quieter.

Someone has to read a document carefully. Someone has to keep the accounts straight. Someone has to check the facts, explain the issue clearly, organize the meeting, teach a younger person, help an elderly neighbor with a form, translate, volunteer a skill, or notice that a small problem is becoming a large one.

These acts rarely make news. They are still part of how a society works.

If you have time and interest, there are formal ways to volunteer and participate. If you do not, ordinary reliability in the parts of civic life you already touch is not a small contribution. A country also needs people who simply do their own work well, deal fairly with others, and leave the systems they use a little better than they found them.

IX. Closing Perspective

A country is built in ordinary life

We began with a simple claim: countries change and get better when their people change and get better. They do not change and get better if their people do not.

That does not mean every national problem is the fault of ordinary citizens. Governments can fail. Institutions can be badly designed. Leaders can be corrupt or foolish. Laws can be poor. History leaves problems that no individual created and no individual can quickly solve.

But institutions are staffed by people, governments are chosen and influenced by people, social expectations are maintained by people, and the next generation learns much of its civic behavior from the people already here. Over time, what millions of us repeatedly accept, reward, excuse, resist and practice becomes part of the country.

This is why civic responsibility is both smaller and larger than it first appears. It is smaller because most of us will never reform a nation. It is larger because the ordinary things we do are repeated, copied and added to what everyone else is doing.

Think beyond the immediate result

Many of the questions in this manual come down to time.

Can I get what I want today? Perhaps. But what happens if everybody gets it this way? What habit does this create? What happens to trust? What happens the next time I need to deal with this person or institution? What kind of system are we building if this becomes normal?

The long view does not always require sacrifice. Often it simply changes how we solve the immediate problem. We may still complain, disagree, compete, protect our interests and insist on our rights. We do it with some thought for what remains after the encounter is over.

A society is partly an inheritance and partly a work in progress. We received roads, laws, institutions, knowledge, customs, public spaces, problems and possibilities from people before us. We will leave all of them, changed in some measure by us, to people who come later.

No one has to be a perfect citizen

Nothing in this manual requires perfection.

People will lose patience, make bad judgments, believe things that turn out to be wrong, fail to speak when perhaps they should have spoken, and sometimes create problems for other people without intending to. That is ordinary human life.

Civic responsibility is not a score to be kept. It is a way of thinking about how our conduct fits into a larger shared life.

Know the basic facts. Think about consequences. Use roughly the same standards for your own side and the other side. Remember the person at the other end. Respect shared things. Use lawful institutions when they can help. Speak or act when it is useful and reasonable to do so. Do not demand from others risks you would not lightly bear yourself. And occasionally ask the simplest question of all: what happens if everybody does this?

And remember the “other people”

It is tempting to finish a manual like this by asking what India should do next. But India is not a person who can read a manual and decide to behave differently tomorrow morning.

People can.

Some have more power than others. Some have more freedom, knowledge, money, influence or opportunity. Some are struggling simply to get through the day. Their responsibilities and choices will not be identical.

But all of us take part, in some measure, in creating the expectations and habits around us.

At the beginning we noted that every one of us is somebody else's “other people.” That remains a useful thought to end with.

The country we leave behind will be shaped partly by what all those “other people” did.

And that includes us.

Appendix A. Where to Learn More or Take Action

Government procedures, websites and contact points change. The resources below are starting points rather than detailed instructions. Where possible, use the current official government website and check the instructions there.

To understand the constitutional duties of citizens

Part IVA, Article 51A of the Constitution of India lists the Fundamental Duties of citizens. They include promoting harmony, protecting the natural environment, developing a spirit of inquiry and reform, safeguarding public property, avoiding violence, and striving towards excellence. These duties are useful background to many of the subjects discussed in this manual.

Constitution of India - Legislative Department: <https://www.legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/>

To register to vote or find election information

The Election Commission of India provides voter-registration and election information, including services for registration, correction of voter details, finding electoral-roll information and tracking application status.

Election Commission of India - Voters' Services Portal: <https://voters.eci.gov.in/>

To obtain information from government

The Right to Information Act gives citizens a way to seek information from public authorities. The Government of India's RTI Online portal can be used for Central Government ministries, departments and other Central public authorities covered by the portal. It should not be used for public authorities under State Governments; states have their own arrangements. The Central portal also provides for first appeals and status tracking.

RTI Online - Government of India: <https://rtionline.gov.in/>

For State Government matters, look for the appropriate State RTI system or State Information Commission. The Central Information Commission maintains a current list of links to State Information Commissions.

Central Information Commission - State Information Commission links: <https://www.cic.gov.in/links-to-state-information-commissions>

To complain about a government service

The Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) allows citizens to lodge and track grievances concerning public-service delivery. It is connected to Central Government ministries and departments and to State Governments, and provides an appeal

facility when a citizen is dissatisfied with the resolution. It is not the route for RTI matters, court or sub judice matters, religious matters, and certain government-employee service matters.

CPGRAMS - Public Grievance Portal: <https://pgportal.gov.in/>

Many State Governments and local bodies also operate their own grievance, information and service portals. If the matter belongs to a State, district, municipality or panchayat, look first for the appropriate official State or local-government service.

If you do not know where to start, a simple internet search can often point you in the right direction. Search for the problem, the place, and words such as "complaint," "grievance," "report," or "official." For example, "streetlight complaint Coimbatore official" is more useful than simply searching for "government complaint." Prefer an official government or public-authority website when one is available, and check that it actually covers your location and problem.

To understand laws and public policy

PRS Legislative Research is an independent, not-for-profit research organization that provides information and analysis on Parliament, legislation and State legislatures. It can be a useful starting point when you want to understand a proposed law or public-policy issue before forming or advocating a strong position.

PRS Legislative Research: <https://prsindia.org/>

PRS - State Legislatures: <https://prsindia.org/legislatures/states>

To volunteer or take part in community work

MY Bharat, run by the Department of Youth Affairs, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, provides volunteering, community-service and experiential-learning opportunities, including opportunities that can be searched by location.

MY Bharat: <https://mybharat.gov.in/>

Students and the National Service Scheme

Students may also have access to the National Service Scheme (NSS) through their educational institution. NSS is intended to give student youth practical experience in community service and explicitly includes developing social and civic responsibility among its objectives.

National Service Scheme: <https://www.nss.gov.in/>

If you help someone after a road accident

Indian law provides specific protection for Good Samaritans who assist victims of motor-vehicle accidents. Section 134A of the Motor Vehicles Act provides the statutory basis. The rules also provide protections concerning questioning and examination; a Good Samaritan who informs the police of an accident or transports a victim to a hospital is not to be subjected to further requirements by the police or hospital and is to be permitted to leave immediately. Detailed procedures and protections should be checked from current official sources because rules and schemes can change.

Ministry of Road Transport and Highways: <https://morth.nic.in/>

Statutory reference: Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, Section 134A (India Code).