

Public Spaces, Public Responsibility: When Accountability Becomes Visible

Abstract

Everyday civic neglect in India persists due to absence of public accountability and not because of lack of laws or awareness. This article examines how habitual behaviours like littering and spitting have become normalized and why large-scale cleanliness campaigns often fail to produce sustained behavioural change. Using Vadodara's recent initiative of publicly naming offenders as a case study, this write up explores how visibility and social accountability can influence civic conduct. Drawing comparisons with international models, the article argues for shifting from punitive enforcement to participatory responsibility. It concludes that lasting civic discipline emerges when accountability is socially grounded, consistently applied and collectively shared.

The Everyday Nature of Civic Neglect

Public spaces are shaped less by grand policies and more by everyday behavior. A wrapper dropped because there is no dustbin nearby. A spit stain because it's momentary and unseen. Behaviours such as littering, spitting, unnecessary honking, and shouting have become so ubiquitous across India that it rarely provokes discomfort or corrective action. Urban India's struggle with public cleanliness is not rooted in the absence of laws or penalties, rather in the lack of everyday accountability.

This is not always because people lack awareness; most citizens know that littering is wrong. Habitual littering has become normalized through a mix of carelessness and convenience. Many people discard waste without pausing to consider its consequences.¹ Responsibility is often deflected, towards the lack of dustbins, government, or diluted by the belief that "everyone else does it too". Others act out of quiet entitlement, assuming that public sanitation workers will clean up after them. Over time, this collective shrug has turned neglect into routine.

In this context, the recent civic initiative in Vadodara has garnered attention. The city administration began publicly displaying the names of individuals fined for littering and public defacement. The measure immediately generated debate where some praised it as bold and effective, others criticized it as humiliating or excessive.

Vadodara's Intervention: A Shift in Method

¹ Caucasus Environmental Knowledge Portal, 'Reasons, Consequences and Possible Solutions of Littering' (CENN) <<https://environment.cenn.org/waste-management/publications/reasons-consequences-possible-solutions-littering/>> accessed 22 January 2026.

Vadodara's move is not radical in the sense of inventing new penalties. Fines for littering and defacement have existed for years across Indian cities. What has changed is visibility; by making names public, the city transformed a private transaction between citizen and authority into a social signal. The act of wrongdoing no longer ended with a receipt or a warning. This approach draws from a simple psychological reality that people are often more responsive to social accountability than financial penalties. A fine may hurt briefly but social recognition, especially negative recognition, lingers longer.

Importantly, this measure does not rely on force nor does it increase surveillance, policing, or punishment severity. Instead, it introduces a pause- a moment where individuals must confront how their actions are seen within a collective.

Why Cleanliness Campaigns Often Plateau

We have seen extensive cleanliness drives over the last decade; posters, advertisements, celebrity endorsements, school pledges, and public messaging have been widespread. Awareness levels are high, yet behavior change remains uneven. Vadodara's intervention disrupts this cycle by making individual actions visible again. It stresses on the idea that public spaces are not anonymous zones they are shared environments shaped by identifiable behavior. We, as a community, must take up the responsibility to tackle the littering issue which harms our shared space i.e. environment before eventually affecting us sooner or later.

How Other Regions Approach Civic Responsibility

Several cities and countries have experimented with similar mechanisms as Vadodara, some formally, others culturally. In **Japan**, civic responsibility has historically been reinforced through culture, social norms and community participation rather than strict punitive system, resulting in cleaner public spaces with less reliance on legal enforcement.²

European cities often combine fines with restorative measures, requiring offenders to participate in community cleaning or maintenance work, reinforcing connection to the space harmed.³

Singapore is known for being one of the most spotless public spaces and strictest anti-littering laws. These strict laws are strongly enforced by patrolling plain-clothes officers and surveillance

² Ivy Bee Luan Ong and Benjamin K. Sovacool, 'A comparative study of littering and waste in Singapore and Japan' (2012) 61 *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 35–42

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0921344911002552>> accessed 22 January 2026.

³ European Forum for Restorative Justice, 'Restorative Cities' (*European Forum for Restorative Justice*) <<https://www.euforumrj.org/restorative-cities>> accessed 22 January 2026.

technology. Many lifts have urine detection systems which automatically lock offenders in and call for the police.⁴

Kigali (capital city of Rwanda) continues to be included among one of the cleanest cities without the threat of harsh fines. Rwandans continue the tradition of ‘*umuganda*’ (community) by cleaning up together every last Saturday of the month.⁵

Vadodara’s model sits somewhere between these approaches; it introduces a social dimension to enforcement that many Indian cities lack.

What Other State Governments Can Do

Other Indian states looking to address civic neglect can draw important lessons from Vadodara’s approach, particularly its emphasis on visibility rather than severity. In a society where behaviour is deeply shaped by community perception, such visibility can have a stronger corrective effect than monetary penalties alone, without resorting to excessive punishment. Many Indian cities impose fines for littering, but the consequences often end there, detached from the damage caused.

States could introduce **restorative measures** where offenders participate in cleaning or maintenance tasks in the same locality where the violation occurred. This approach reinforces the relationship between individual action and shared environment. Behavioural change becomes longer-lasting when responsibility is experienced directly instead of paid off.

Community participation offers another avenue for adaptation, provided it is structured rather than purely voluntary. States could institutionalize periodic community maintenance efforts at the ward or neighbourhood level, supported by municipal coordination. This can help building a sense of civic pride which will in turn encourage respect for the environment and has the power to inspire collective action to end plastic waste. **POWERED BY**

Drawing from international examples like Japan, Indian states can **embed civic responsibility into school routines**. Involving students in maintaining their learning environments, managing shared spaces, and practicing waste segregation builds habits that persist beyond classrooms. This approach frames discipline and cleanliness as collective responsibility, creating continuity between childhood behaviour and adult civic conduct.

When citizens see that rules are enforced predictably and transparently, compliance increases without the need for intrusive monitoring. Technology can further support these efforts if used to enhance consistency rather than surveillance, like it did in case of Singapore. States can adopt

⁴ Alliance to End Plastic Waste, ‘*The countries who have built a culture of cleanups*’ (Alliance to End Plastic Waste, 11 May 2021) <<https://www.endplasticwaste.org/insights/story/the-countries-who-have-built-a-culture-of-cleanups>> accessed 22 January 2026

⁵ Ibid.

digital tools for reporting violations, tracking enforcement outcomes, and ensuring penalties are applied uniformly.

Reframing Civic Behaviour as Participation

Civic responsibility can't forever rely on fines or campaigns, nor can it depend solely on moral appeals; what it needs is participation where people see themselves as contributors. Vadodara's approach may or may not be perfect but it depicts how sometimes, change simply begins by making the invisible, visible and reminding people that shared spaces carry shared obligations.

Ultimately, Vadodara's intervention offers a broader lesson for Indian cities- where systems can make responsibility visible and socially grounded, ultimately shaping public behaviour organically. However, selective enforcement or excessive shaming risks eroding public trust and turning civic initiatives into sources of resentment. Other states need not replicate the model in form, but they would do well to adopt its underlying principle that accountability works best when it is seen, shared, and sustained.

