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Print Culture and the Making of Public Opinion in the Bengal Renaissance: Implications for Inclusive Education Implementation in Rural Schools in India.

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Abstract- This article links two domains that are usually studied separately: (a) print culture and the making of public opinion during the Bengal Renaissance, and (b) the contemporary implementation of inclusive education in rural elementary schools in India. Using a policy implementation perspective, the study argues that inclusive education is not only a matter of legal mandates and administrative delivery, but also of how publics are formed through media, texts, and communicative institutions that shape what communities understand as legitimate, desirable, and feasible. The policy framework comprises the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act, Section 16) and Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), both of which position inclusion as a rights-based obligation rather than discretionary charity. A qualitative-dominant comparative case study was conducted in a selected district, contrasting rural and semi-urban government elementary schools. Data sources included interviews with teachers, head teachers, parents, and district and block officials; classroom observations; facility and accessibility audits; and documentary analysis of policy circulars, training materials, and school-level records. Thematic analysis was organized around governance arrangements, institutional capacity, and street-level discretion. Findings show that (1) district-block-school coordination is mediated by paperwork and circulars that rarely translate into pedagogic support; (2) capacity deficits in rural schools (infrastructure, specialist access, multigrade constraints) narrow the range of feasible inclusion practices; and (3) teachers and school leaders routinely enact inclusion through discretionary coping, producing uneven participation outcomes. Drawing on Bengal Renaissance scholarship on contending print cultures and vernacular publics, the article proposes that implementation gaps persist partly because inclusive education has not been institutionalized as a local public norm through accessible, vernacular, and community-anchored communication systems. Policy recommendations emphasize capability-building governance, accessible information ecosystems, and safeguards against discretionary gatekeeping.

Keywords- Bengal Renaissance; print culture; public opinion; inclusive education; RPwD Act 2016 Section 16; UNCRPD Article 24; street-level bureaucracy.

I. Introduction

The Bengal Renaissance is often narrated as a moment of intellectual ferment marked by educational reform, social critique, and a rapidly expanding print world in and around colonial Calcutta. Print did not merely circulate ideas; it helped create publics by enabling new forms of address, debate, persuasion, and moral regulation. In this

sense, print culture was not an informational layer added to social change. It was a mechanism through which social change became thinkable and actionable, by shaping what people could read, discuss, contest, and authorize as "public opinion".

This article uses that historical insight to diagnose a contemporary policy puzzle: why does inclusive education remain unevenly implemented in rural elementary schools even when legal mandates are strong? India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 imposes duties on educational institutions (Section 16), and the UNCRPD (Article 24) requires an inclusive education system and non-exclusion from general education on the basis of disability. Yet, rural schools frequently operate with constrained infrastructure, limited specialist support, multigrade teaching arrangements, and persistent stigma that shapes expectations and participation.

A conventional implementation explanation points to "capacity gaps" (ramps, toilets, assistive devices, special educators, training). Those gaps are real, but they do not fully explain why inclusion is often reduced to enrollment, paperwork compliance, or episodic accommodations. This article argues that inclusive education is also mediated by public opinion and local norms: what teachers, parents, and communities believe inclusion is, what they view as legitimate classroom participation, and whether disability rights are understood as enforceable entitlements or as discretionary benevolence.

The Bengal Renaissance provides a conceptual bridge because it shows how public opinion is produced through media infrastructures and communicative institutions. Scholarship on colonial Bengal demonstrates that multiple print cultures co-existed and competed, including elite literary publics and commercial vernacular print worlds. These struggles shaped what counted as "proper" language, knowledge, and respectable social reform. Translating this to the present, inclusive education policy is also mediated by texts and institutions: circulars, training manuals, assessment forms, school notice boards, disability certificates, and increasingly hybrid print-digital messaging. Where these communication systems are inaccessible or socially thin in rural contexts, rights-based inclusion can fail to become a shared public norm.

Objectives

1. Examine how inclusive education policy is governed and coordinated at district, block, and school levels.
2. Analyze how institutional capacity (infrastructure, training, support services) shapes implementation in rural vs semi-urban schools.
3. Explore how teacher and school-leader discretion affects inclusion practices.
4. Identify gaps between legal-policy mandates and everyday school practices in rural contexts, and propose policy recommendations.
5. Develop a contribution that links print culture and the making of public opinion to contemporary implementation dynamics

II. Policy and Theoretical Framework

Policy framework: rights-based inclusive education

The RPwD Act, 2016 provides statutory grounding for inclusive education duties, including obligations placed on educational institutions (Section 16). The UNCRPD's

Article 24 frames inclusive education as a right to be realized through systemic measures such as non-exclusion, equal access within local communities, and supports necessary for participation and learning. Importantly, UN guidance clarifies that inclusive education is not simply "integration" or co-location; it requires transformation in financing, administration, design, delivery, and monitoring of education systems.

This rights-based framing implies two implementation requirements:

- Inclusion must be embedded in system design and resourcing (not dependent on individual goodwill).
- Implementation must be judged by meaningful participation and learning, not only by enrollment or compliance artifacts.

Policy implementation theory: multi-level translation under constraint

Implementation theory emphasizes that policy does not travel as a stable object from text to practice. It is interpreted, prioritized, and adapted across levels. In inclusive education, ambiguity is high (what counts as reasonable accommodation in a multigrade class?) and resource conflict is chronic (time, staffing, specialist supports). This makes local governance and institutional capacity central to understanding outcomes.

Street-level bureaucracy: discretion as policy in action

Street-level bureaucracy highlights that frontline workers enact policy through routine decisions under pressure. In schools, teachers and head teachers decide daily how to organize participation, assessment, peer interactions, discipline, and whether accommodations are provided. When capacity is thin, discretion expands. Discretion can enable creative accommodation, but it can also become gatekeeping that normalizes exclusion through "pragmatic" routines.

Governance and institutional capacity in rural education systems

Governance is treated as the coordination and accountability architecture connecting district, block, and school levels, including monitoring mechanisms and resource flows. Capacity refers to infrastructure and accessibility, teacher training and coaching, specialist services, assistive learning materials, and administrative time for inclusive planning. In rural settings, capacity is often structurally weaker due to geographic distance from service centers and staffing constraints, intensifying discretionary implementation.

Print culture and public opinion: from Bengal Renaissance to implementation publics

Research on colonial Bengal argues that print culture did not produce a single public sphere but multiple contending publics, including elite standardized language projects and commercial vernacular print markets associated with neighborhoods such as Battala. This matters because public opinion is not merely aggregated preference; it is shaped by media formats, language hierarchies, distribution networks, and social legitimacy.

We adapt this insight as an "implementation public sphere" framework:

- Policy texts (laws, circulars, guidelines) are communicative artifacts that must be interpreted and authorized.

- The circulation of these texts in accessible language and formats shapes public awareness and legitimacy.
- Rural communication infrastructures (libraries, local press access, literacy practices, school-community interfaces) shape whether inclusive education becomes a public norm or remains bureaucratic paperwork.

III. Review of Related Literature

Print culture and the formation of publics in colonial Bengal
Studies of colonial Bengal emphasize the heterogeneity of print cultures and their role in shaping social identities and publics. Anindita Ghosh's work on contested print cultures highlights conflicts between elite projects of literary standardization and commercial vernacular publishing that served broader and often marginalized readerships. This literature suggests that public opinion is produced through struggles over language, respectability, and authority, not merely through wider availability of texts.

Print geographies matter. The prominence of commercial print cultures (including Battala as a metonymic site) signals that distribution networks, genre forms, and affordability shaped what kinds of publics could be formed. The implication for contemporary policy is direct: if rights knowledge and inclusive norms are circulated through inaccessible forms, then legal mandates may not become socially enforceable expectations.

The rise of vernacular press and public opinion
Historical accounts of Bengali journalism locate the early vernacular press as a key arena for public opinion formation, with developments from early nineteenth-century publications onwards. Even if the early press was tied to missionary or elite projects, its wider significance lay in building a routine form through which "the public" could be addressed and could imagine itself as a public.

Abhijit Gupta's work on the spread of print beyond presidency cities highlights how print networks extended into the hinterland, shaping knowledge circulation and public formation in provincial spaces. This is crucial for a rural implementation study because rural publics are not formed automatically; they depend on infrastructures and mediators that connect village institutions to broader knowledge networks.

Inclusive education and the right to non-exclusion
The UNCRPD and interpretive guidance position inclusive education as a systemic obligation. General guidance emphasizes that inclusion requires changes to system design and monitoring, not only placement. Domestic legal frameworks, including the RPwD Act, reinforce this orientation by placing duties on educational institutions.

Implementation mechanisms: governance, capacity, discretion
Implementation studies repeatedly find that where administrative monitoring is compliance-heavy and support-light, schools respond with paperwork rather than pedagogic change. Where specialist supports are episodic, teachers rely on personal coping strategies. This makes discretion a central mechanism by which inclusion is either enabled or restricted.

Synthesis: what this article adds

The literature on Bengal print culture demonstrates that public opinion is produced through media ecosystems and legitimacy struggles. The implementation literature shows that policy outcomes are shaped by governance, capacity, and frontline discretion. This article integrates these insights to argue that inclusive education implementation is partly a communicative-institutional problem: rights do not become real in rural settings when they are not circulated, translated, and institutionalized as local public norms in accessible forms.

IV. Research Methodology

Research design

A qualitative-dominant comparative case study with embedded mixed-method elements (audit scoring and document frequency mapping) was conducted in a selected district in India (anonymized). The comparison was between:

- Rural government elementary schools in remote villages, characterized by multigrade teaching and greater distance from block services.
- Semi-urban government elementary schools closer to block and district offices and service centers.

Sampling

Purposive sampling selected 8 schools (4 rural, 4 semi-urban) to capture variation in infrastructure, enrollment size, and proximity to services. Participants were recruited using role-based criteria:

- Teachers (n = 24; 3 per school)
- Head teachers (n = 8; 1 per school)
- Parents/caregivers of children with disabilities (n = 20)
- District and block officials involved in inclusive education and school monitoring (n = 10)

Data sources and instruments

1. Semi-structured interviews

- Policy awareness and interpretation
- Support access and service pathways
- Inclusion routines and perceived constraints
- Communication practices with parents/community

2. Classroom observations (two full days per school)

- Participation, grouping, and task differentiation
- Assessment practices and feedback
- Peer interactions and stigma markers
- Use of print materials and accessible resources

3. Facility and accessibility audits

- Entrance, classroom mobility, toilets, pathways
- Availability of assistive materials (large print, braille, audio, visual supports)
- School information accessibility (notice boards, communication to parents)

4. Document and policy review

- National legal texts and interpretive guidance
- District and block circulars and meeting minutes (where shared)

- School-level registers and Individual Education Plan formats (where available)
- Public-facing materials: wall writings, posters, local pamphlets, school notices

Analytical strategy

Thematic analysis was conducted using a codebook aligned to three core domains:

- Governance arrangements (coordination, monitoring, resource flow, communication systems)
- Capacity constraints (infrastructure, training, specialist supports, multigrade conditions, materials)
- Teacher and school-level discretion (accommodation decisions, coping strategies, gatekeeping)

A secondary interpretive layer mapped communication mechanisms as an "implementation print ecology" (types of texts used, their accessibility, language, distribution, and legitimacy). Findings were compared across rural and semi-urban settings to identify structural differences and discretionary patterns.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Schools and participants were anonymized. Care was taken to avoid reporting identifiable stories that could harm participants, especially children.

V. Findings and Analysis

Governance arrangements

- Governance as paperwork transmission: the dominance of circulars and registers

Across both clusters, inclusive education governance was experienced primarily through documents: circulars, reporting formats, survey templates, and compliance registers. Teachers often described inclusion as something "done in files" rather than embedded in lesson planning. In the semi-urban cluster, block-level visits were more frequent, but still heavily oriented to data verification.

Rural schools described a "thin governance presence": contact with block officials clustered around survey and inspection cycles. Between cycles, teachers were left to manage inclusion without systematic coaching, producing a governance pattern best described as "episodic oversight and continuous discretion".

Weak horizontal coordination: education and disability supports as disconnected systems

Participants reported that disability-related services (assessment, assistive devices, specialist advice) were not experienced as a continuous pathway. Families in rural areas faced higher travel costs and opportunity costs to reach service centers. As a result, children’s needs were often known but not systematically supported.

This gap became an implementation problem inside classrooms: teachers could identify barriers but lacked a reliable institutional mechanism to address them. The governance system, in practice, shifted from service delivery to documentation of need.

- **Communication as governance: who receives what information, and in what form**

The most consequential governance difference between rural and semi-urban schools was not only staff availability, but communication reach.

- Semi-urban schools had higher exposure to trainings and "policy talk", and parents reported greater awareness of entitlements.
- Rural schools reported reliance on informal intermediaries: one active teacher, a local leader, or an occasional NGO visit. When intermediaries were absent, policy knowledge did not circulate.

This is where the Bengal print culture lens adds explanatory power. Public opinion is not created simply by policy existence. It depends on circulation and legibility. The historical record of Bengal's contending print cultures shows that publics were shaped by distribution networks and language hierarchies. Similarly, rural implementation publics are shaped by whether inclusion rights are communicated in accessible vernacular forms and whether they become discussable as public matters rather than private requests.

Capacity constraints

- Infrastructure: ruralized accessibility deficits

Accessibility audits showed common deficits in rural schools: uneven pathways, steps without ramps, narrow doorways, and toilets that were not usable for children with mobility constraints. Semi-urban schools were more likely to have basic access improvements, though toilet accessibility remained problematic.

These deficits did not merely affect attendance. They shaped classroom participation and social stigma. Children who required assistance to enter classrooms, move to the board, or use toilets were more visible as "dependent", increasing peer stigma and reducing autonomy. This undermined the UNCRPD's inclusion principle of equal access within local communities.

- Specialist support and materials: episodic services, low integration

Both clusters reported limited specialist support. Rural schools experienced longer gaps between visits. Where assistive devices or materials were obtained, teachers often lacked guidance on integrating them into everyday instruction. This produced "resource without pedagogy" outcomes: materials existed but did not reliably change learning participation.

- Multigrade classrooms: time poverty and triage

Multigrade teaching was concentrated in rural schools. Observations indicated that teachers used whole-class instruction to manage multiple grade expectations, leaving less space for differentiated support. In such conditions, inclusion depended on discretionary triage:

- Teachers prioritized students who could work independently.
- Students needing repeated explanation were sometimes assigned repetitive tasks that maintained order but reduced learning depth.

This triage was often described as unavoidable under workload constraints. However, it created a pattern of "presence without participation", where inclusion was nominal rather than substantive.

- Capacity as an information problem: inaccessible print and communication formats

A central capacity finding concerned information accessibility:

- School notices, entitlements, and meeting information were mainly communicated through text-heavy formats.
- Many rural parents reported limited ability to interpret documents or to challenge school decisions.
- Information was rarely provided in accessible formats (easy-to-read, audio, pictorial supports) for parents and children.

This is a capacity deficit with direct governance consequences: when policy knowledge does not circulate widely, families cannot claim rights, and schools are less likely to feel accountable to a local public.

Teacher and school-level discretion

- Discretion enabling inclusion: adaptive pedagogy and informal support

Teachers and head teachers in both settings demonstrated adaptive practices that enabled participation despite limited supports:

- flexible assessment modes (oral responses, reduced writing burden)
- peer buddy systems for mobility and task support
- seating adjustments and visual cueing
- informal collaboration with parents for attendance continuity

These practices functioned as "street-level accommodation", translating rights into action where institutional supports were thin.

- Discretion as gatekeeping: reduced expectations and quiet exclusion

The same discretionary space also produced exclusionary routines, especially in rural settings:

- assigning children with disabilities to low-demand activities to avoid disruption
- withdrawing children from class activities during high-pressure periods (exams, inspections)
- recommending non-attendance or informal transfer when support needs were high
- interpreting inclusion as "care" rather than "learning", which justified reduced curriculum access

These routines were rarely framed as discrimination. They were framed as pragmatism. This is precisely the street-level bureaucracy mechanism: when policy goals exceed capacity, frontline workers develop coping routines that stabilize work but can undermine rights.

- Discretion shaped by public opinion: stigma, legitimacy, and what is thinkable

Teachers' discretionary decisions were strongly shaped by perceived community attitudes:

- In villages where disability stigma was high, teachers described pressure to keep the classroom "orderly", reinforcing exclusionary routines.
- In semi-urban settings with more exposure to rights discourse and NGO messaging, teachers were more likely to describe inclusion as a legitimate expectation rather than a personal favor.

This supports the article's core claim: inclusion is not only implemented through resources and rules, but also through publics. The Bengal Renaissance print culture literature demonstrates that norms and legitimacy are produced through communicative

institutions and genres that authorize certain voices and marginalize others. In rural inclusive education, the absence of accessible, vernacular, and community-anchored rights communication allows stigma to remain the default public opinion, shaping discretion toward gatekeeping.

VI. Discussion

Reinterpreting implementation: from legal mandates to implementation publics
The RPwD Act and UNCRPD provide rights-based mandates. Yet the study shows a persistent mandate-practice gap mediated by governance fragmentation, ruralized capacity constraints, and discretionary enactment. This gap is not adequately explained by "lack of ramps" alone.

The Bengal Renaissance offers a conceptual reminder: social change requires publics. Print culture created arenas where issues could be named, debated, and morally regulated. Public opinion was made through distribution networks, language politics, genres, and institutional legitimacy. In contemporary rural inclusion, policy texts circulate mainly as administrative artifacts, not as local public knowledge. Where rights do not circulate as accessible and discussable information, inclusion remains a fragile practice dependent on individual discretion.

Governance as communication: a missing link in rural inclusion
Findings suggest that governance failure is partly communicative:

- policy messages travel downward (district to school) as paperwork
- rights knowledge does not reliably travel outward (school to families/community) in accessible forms
- feedback rarely travels upward as claims or grievances, especially from rural parents

This creates a closed circuit of administrative compliance without public accountability. UN guidance on inclusive education emphasizes system-level transformation and monitoring. But monitoring that cannot "hear" rural families is structurally biased toward what is easily documented.

Discretion: necessary, but risky without capability and public accountability
Discretion is inevitable in complex classrooms, especially with multigrade teaching. The problem is not discretion itself, but discretionary gatekeeping under scarcity and stigma. When families and communities lack accessible knowledge of entitlements, discretion becomes harder to challenge. The article therefore reframes "capacity-building" to include information ecosystems: accessible communication, vernacular rights literacy, and local channels that normalize inclusion as a public expectation.

VII. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Strengthen district-block-school coordination beyond paperwork

1. Shift block-level visits from document verification to practice coaching (lesson adaptation demonstrations, peer mentoring, classroom problem-solving).
2. Establish inclusion support teams at block level with clear service standards (frequency, follow-up, response time).

3. Create a simple, time-bound pathway connecting schools to assessment and assistive support services, with follow-up accountability.

Build rural capacity as a rights prerequisite

1. Prioritize barrier-free infrastructure in rural schools, focusing on toilets, pathways, and classroom mobility as participation enablers.
2. Ensure predictable specialist support and integrate it into teacher planning (not only camp-based interventions).
3. Address multigrade constraints through staffing rationalization where feasible; where not feasible, provide multigrade-inclusive pedagogy toolkits and coaching.

Develop an accessible, vernacular "rights communication ecosystem"

Inspired by Bengal print culture insights about circulation and publics:

1. Produce easy-to-read, local-language entitlements materials for parents (visual, low-text, audio options) and distribute through schools, Panchayat networks, and community health workers.
2. Create a block-level "inclusive education bulletin" in accessible formats that shares entitlements, service schedules, and grievance pathways.
3. Use school notice boards not only for administrative notices but also for inclusion norms (anti-stigma messaging, participation expectations, parent meeting summaries).
4. Train schools on accessible communication (plain language, pictorial supports), including for parents with limited literacy.

Safeguards against discretionary gatekeeping

1. Require a simple learner support plan for each identified child, focusing on participation goals rather than deficit labeling.
2. Monitor participation indicators (engagement in core instruction, assessment access) rather than only enrollment and register completion.
3. Establish confidential grievance channels at block level with time-bound response, and publicize them in accessible formats.

Public opinion and stigma interventions

1. Community-based reading and discussion circles (school plus community leaders) using short, accessible materials on disability rights and inclusion.
2. Structured parent-teacher meetings that include rights awareness and practical classroom participation strategies, not only attendance and discipline.

VIII. Contribution to Knowledge

1. Conceptual contribution: Introduces "implementation publics" as a bridge between Bengal Renaissance print culture scholarship and contemporary inclusive education implementation.
2. Empirical contribution: Provides rural vs semi-urban comparative evidence on how governance is mediated by documents and communication reach, not only by staffing.
3. Theoretical contribution: Integrates policy implementation theory, street-level bureaucracy, and institutional capacity with a media-and-circulation perspective.

4. Policy contribution: Expands the meaning of capacity to include accessible rights communication ecosystems as a practical lever to reduce discretionary gatekeeping.

Limitations of the Study

1. Single-district case design limits generalizability, though mechanisms are transferable to similar rural contexts.
2. The study focuses on school-level implementation; further work should examine district budgeting and procurement chains for accessibility upgrades.
3. Observation duration may not capture seasonal variation (exams, audits, migration periods).
4. The print culture framework is used as an interpretive lens; future research could deepen historical-institutional tracing of media infrastructures and rural education governance.

IX. Conclusion

Inclusive education in India is backed by strong legal mandates under the RPwD Act and the UNCRPD. Yet rural implementation remains uneven because governance is often experienced as paperwork transmission, capacity deficits restrict feasible practices, and frontline discretion becomes the primary mechanism through which rights are translated into everyday routines. This article argues that the mandate-practice gap also reflects a failure to institutionalize inclusion as a local public norm. The Bengal Renaissance demonstrates that public opinion is made through media ecosystems and circulation practices, not merely through the existence of ideas.

For rural inclusion, this means that accessible, vernacular, community-anchored communication systems are not optional add-ons. They are part of implementation capacity. When rights knowledge circulates widely and is discussable as public opinion, it creates accountability pressures that reduce harmful discretionary gatekeeping and support sustained institutional change. Bridging legal mandates and local realities therefore requires an integrated strategy: stronger governance coordination, rural capability investments, continuous professional support, and an accessible rights communication ecosystem that makes inclusion a shared public expectation rather than a discretionary act.

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