



# **Identity, Dignity, and Rights: Ambedkar's Constitutional Vision and Marginalized Communities in India Schools in India.**

**Animesh Chowdhury, Dr. Pradeep Kumar Kesharwani**

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar, Kalinga University, Raipur

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Professor, Department of History, Kalinga University, Raipur (C.G)

**Abstract-** It further explores the ways in which Ambedkar's constitutional ideal, as reflected in the concepts of dignity, equality, liberty and fraternity are materialised, negotiated or violated in everyday experiences of inclusion in rural India. Based on Section 16 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 & Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this study examines inclusion and exclusion of children with disabilities and other marginalized learners due to how administrative governance, institutional capacity and street level discretion plays out in the lived experience of inclusion in rural elementary schools in a selected district. The research used qualitative case study design embedded within a structured audit framework and is based on interviews with teachers, head teachers, parents, and block and district officials; classroom observations; school accessibility audits; and policy-document review. Thematic analysis identifies three core findings. First, district and block governance largely operates through procedural compliance and data reporting, which often displaces dignity-centered problem solving and weakens school-facing support. Second, capacity constraints (barriered infrastructure, uneven training, scarce specialist support, and multigrade classrooms) create a predictable gap between rights-based mandates and routine practice. Third, teacher and head teacher discretion becomes the main mechanism through which dignity is either produced (through adaptive pedagogy and peer-support routines) or denied (through informal exclusion, labeling, and lowered expectations). The article proposes a dignity-centered implementation lens that connects Ambedkar's constitutional morality to institutional accountability in inclusive schooling and offers policy recommendations to strengthen coordination, capacity, and rights-based school culture in rural contexts.

**Keywords-** Ambedkar, Dignity, Inclusive education, Policy implementation, Street-level bureaucracy, Rural schooling. Disability rights.

## **I. Introduction**

Ambedkar's constitutional vision is frequently invoked in Indian public life as a moral foundation for a society grounded in equality, dignity, and social democracy. Yet constitutional values become meaningful not only through formal rights but through everyday institutional practices that shape the "significance of life" for marginalized groups. In rural schooling systems, this everyday life is experienced in classrooms, morning assemblies, examinations, peer interactions, and teacher judgments about who belongs, who can learn, and who is worth investing in. The dignity of this promise is, therefore, contingent upon the banal machinations of governance and delivery.



This is a conundrum that inclusive education, by its very nature, both provides important ground to critically explore and that risks falling prey to (and this is important) because it must do the delicate work of standing for difference (and difference can mean a lot of things) without homogenising. India has an overarching rights-based legal framework to provide for education and the principle of non-discrimination, especially as given under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act). Section 16 on duties of educational institutions and other provisions relating to measures to promote inclusive education, Chapter III of the Act.

Internationally, Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) defines the right to inclusive education and requires states to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system and that persons with disabilities have access to an inclusive education system at all levels, and to quality free primary education within the communities in which they live. However, inclusive schooling in rural India continues to be an exercise in implementation gaps despite these promises. This is often addressed by schools being behind on infrastructure support, lack of specialist support, multigrade teaching conditions, high teacher load, along with issues of social stigma which intersects with caste, gender, poverty, and disability. If you were to suggest that under these constraints, implementation is determined much more by informal process than legal text, that institutional capacity of district and block systems is much more important than additional legal mandates, and that the informal discretionary judgment of teachers and school leaders who operate as street-level bureaucrats to manage competing demands on their time is critical, you would be correct.

How do district, block and school institutions in rural India turn rights-based inclusive education mandates into day-to-day ground level practice? In what way does the institutional capital determine the at-dignity of the marginalized learners in school spaces? And how does teacher and school leader discretion serve to mediate the tension between constitutional ideals and lived reality? The title puts Ambedkar in the foreground, but the study does not end up being a strictly philosophical reading; it is an implementation focused one that considers dignity as an empirical output of governance and classroom practice.

The article makes three moves. The first way that it reframes inclusive education is as a dignity project that is fully in line with Ambedkar's conception of constitutional morality. Secondly it connects policy implementation theory, governance capacity and street-level bureaucracy to elucidate how and why rights-based mandates usually ends up as procedural compliance. Third, it offers policy recommendations that take dignity seriously and use its promise as an implementation criterion, not a slogan.

## **II. Policy and Theoretical Framework**

### **Dignity, social democracy and constitutional morality in Ambedkar's constitutional vision**

Ambedkar associated democracy with a mode of living based on liberty, equality and fraternity rather than merely an institutional set-up. A well known formulation emphasizes that political democracy needs to be based on social democracy, defined as a way of life which recognizes liberty equality and fraternity as fundamental, which



helps conceptualize the shortcomings of the latter. This is not just rhetorical; as he continues, rights have little weight when the daily instantiation of institutions perpetuates the same hierarchies, humiliations and exclusions.

Ambedkar suggest that rights, without collegiality are empty, a form of solidarity is impotent. When he contributed in debates in the Constituent Assembly and when his final interventions are interpreted, it is clear that without fraternity, equality and liberty be little more than empty slogans. The analytical relevance for inclusive education is straightforward: children with disabilities are formally included in school systems, allowing schools to then proudly proclaim to be in compliance while daily practices continue to define them (and their families) as inferior, burdensome, or simply out of the "normal" learner category. Dignity is thus not only a constitutional principle but rather an implementation problem.

This article treats Ambedkar's constitutional morality as a governance standard: institutions must cultivate routinized practices that prevent humiliation, enable participation, and expand substantive equality. In rural inclusive education, this means examining not only policy text but the administrative and pedagogic mechanisms through which dignity is enacted or denied.

#### **Rights-based inclusive education: legal and policy obligations**

The RPwD Act, 2016 establishes duties of educational institutions and obligations of governments and local authorities regarding inclusive education. Article 24 of the UNCRPD requires an inclusive education system at all levels and emphasizes access within the communities in which learners live. Rights in these frameworks are not limited to physical access; they imply reasonable accommodation, participation, and equal recognition.

Implementation, however, is mediated by administrative programs and schemes, including Samagra Shiksha, which includes a dedicated inclusive education component for children with special needs and provides norms for support such as resource teachers or special educators, aids, appliances, and other provisions. State-level administrative systems further shape how these provisions translate into block and school routines.

#### **Policy implementation theory: the implementation gap as a governance phenomenon**

Policy implementation theory emphasizes that implementation is not the final step of policy but the site where policy becomes real, reshaped by inter-organizational coordination, incentives, and capacity. Classic work points to the vulnerability of implementation chains: each link introduces opportunities for delay, distortion, and symbolic compliance. (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984)

For inclusive education, the chain is long: identification of children, certification processes, allocation of aids, school accessibility measures, teacher training, classroom accommodations, assessment adaptations, and monitoring. In rural settings, coordination costs are higher and capacity is thinner, making implementation gaps predictable rather than exceptional.



### **Street-level bureaucracy: teachers and head teachers as makers of policy-in-practice**

Street-level bureaucracy theory argues that frontline public workers function under resource constraints, ambiguous goals, and high workloads, and thus exercise discretion, develop coping routines, and effectively "make" policy through practice. In rural schools, teachers and head teachers decide:

- whether accommodations are provided or treated as optional
- how disability and difference are interpreted (needs vs nuisance)
- how discipline, peer relations, seating, and assessment are managed
- how families are engaged or blamed
- what "inclusion" means (participation vs mere attendance)

Discretion can create dignity (through adaptive pedagogy and supportive routines) or erode it (through informal exclusion, lowered expectations, humiliation, or neglect). This is where Ambedkar's vision becomes empirically testable: dignity is visible in how discretion is used and how institutions enable or constrain dignifying choices.

### **Governance and institutional capacity: coordination, infrastructure, and support systems**

- **The article uses a three-part analytic lens:**
  1. Governance arrangements: coordination across district, block, and school levels; monitoring; inter-departmental convergence.
  2. Capacity constraints: infrastructure and accessibility; training; specialist support; materials; time and staffing.
  3. Discretionary practice: teacher and school leader decisions that shape daily inclusion.

The essence of the argument is that poor coordination and very low capacity pass the responsibility for rights implementation to individual practice, resulting in highly variable dignity effects between schools.

## **III. Review of Related Literature**

### **Institutional life: Ambedkar, rights and dignity**

It has been widely interpreted that Ambedkar in his writings and speeches had advocated a 'rights-based' approach of emancipation based on 'dignity and self-respect' rather than on 'charity.' Writings linked to his constitutional vision highlight social democracy, fraternity and constitutional morality as living ideals that must be nurtured in institutions. Ambedkar and education literature tend to emphasise education as a means of social change that he envisaged, and access to education as a matter of citizenship.

Yet much of the Ambedkar-focused scholarship remains normative or historical. A policy implementation approach adds value by asking how constitutional morality is enacted through routine governance, especially in rural public systems where resource scarcity and social hierarchy can normalize indignity.



### **Gap Between Policy and Practice: A Brief History of Inclusive Education in India**

The literature on inclusive education in India captures these shifts of moving away from segregation to integration and more overt inclusive education discourse over time, as well as revealing ongoing barriers in school systems. Nidhi Singal's research is often cited for exploring the 'international theory to national policy to practice gap' and the uneven implementation of inclusion.

Implementation barriers identified in Indian studies include inaccessible infrastructure, limited teacher preparation, shortage of specialist support, weak assistive device maintenance, stigma, and administrative compliance burdens. These barriers are amplified in rural schooling where multigrade classrooms and staffing constraints reduce the feasibility of individualized accommodations.

### **Governance and capacity in rural education systems**

District and block institutions mediate between policy and classrooms. In many Indian states, block and cluster resource structures were established to support teacher development and provide academic support, but their effectiveness depends on staffing, transport, training, and clarity of role. Official mission guidance describes BRC/CRC roles in in-service training and regular academic support. Implementation research on Indian bureaucracy also highlights a tendency toward file-driven compliance and reporting burdens that can displace problem-solving.

Inclusive education depends heavily on convergence with health and social welfare for assessment, certification, aids, and therapy. When convergence is episodic rather than routinized, schools rely on informal coping.

### **Street-level bureaucracy and teacher discretion in education policy**

Teacher discretion is central to how policy is experienced, particularly where formal guidelines are ambiguous or resources are inadequate. Lipsky's framework provides a strong conceptual base for analyzing how teachers ration time, simplify tasks, and develop routines that shape service delivery. This literature implies that "inclusion" can become symbolic when discretion is shaped by scarcity, stigma, and managerial pressure to complete syllabi and meet administrative targets.

### **Gap addressed by this study**

The literature establishes: (a) Ambedkar's dignity-centered constitutional vision, (b) rights-based inclusive education mandates, and (c) persistent implementation barriers. However, fewer studies integrate these into a single, rural implementation analysis that empirically links governance arrangements, capacity constraints, and discretionary practices to the lived dignity of marginalized learners. This study addresses that gap.

## **IV. Research Methodology**

### **Research design**

A qualitative case study design was used, with an embedded structured component for school accessibility audits. This approach is appropriate for examining how policy is implemented through administrative routines and classroom practice in a specific rural context.



### **Study setting and sampling**

The study was conducted in a selected rural district (pseudonym: "Kalyanpur") within West Bengal. Three rural blocks were purposively selected to reflect variation in distance from district headquarters, availability of resource personnel, and reported enrollment of children with disabilities.

Twelve government elementary schools were selected to capture variation in infrastructure condition and school size. Within each school, teachers and head teachers were interviewed, and parents of children with disabilities were identified through school lists and community referrals. Block- and district-level participants were selected based on their roles in inclusive education planning, monitoring, and coordination.

### **Data sources**

- **Data were collected from:**

A. Interviews (semi-structured)

- teachers (n = 18)
- head teachers (n = 12)
- parents of children with disabilities (n = 10)
- block resource personnel (n = 6)
- district officials (n = 4)

B. Classroom observations

- two lessons per school (n = 24), documenting participation patterns, teacher interaction, peer relations, and adaptations.

C. School accessibility and inclusion audits

- structured checklist covering ramps, toilet access, classroom accessibility, seating arrangements, signage, assistive materials, and basic learning supports.

D. Document and policy review

- RPwD Act and administrative circulars available at school/block levels
- Samagra Shiksha inclusive education guidance and state mission documents on BRC/CRC functions.

### **Analysis approach**

- **Thematic analysis was conducted in three steps:**
- **First-cycle coding:** governance, capacity, and discretion codes.
- **Second-cycle coding:** mechanisms such as "compliance displacement," "dignity denial through routine," "discretionary accommodation," and "informal exclusion."
- **Thematic integration:** themes mapped to the analytic lens and interpreted through Ambedkar's dignity-centered constitutional morality.

Triangulation was used to align interviews with observation notes and audit findings.

### **Ethical considerations**

Informed consent was obtained. Participant identities and school locations were anonymized. Given the sensitivity of caste and disability stigma, interviews were conducted with careful attention to confidentiality and non-harm.



## V. Findings and Analysis

### **Governance arrangements: rights translated into paperwork more than practice**

- Compliance displacement: when reporting substitutes for dignity-centered support District and block governance was experienced by schools primarily through data demands: identification lists, attendance formats, disability categories, and utilization documentation. Officials described these processes as necessary for planning and fund release, while teachers described them as "additional work" that rarely translated into classroom-relevant support.

A key pattern was compliance displacement: time and administrative energy were directed toward proving activity, rather than enabling access, accommodations, and participation. This matters from an Ambedkar lens because dignity is not produced by formats; it is produced by practical capability in schools. When governance equates compliance with inclusion, it risks converting rights into paperwork and leaving the everyday humiliation of exclusion unaddressed.

- Fragmented convergence: certification and aids as episodic events, not stable services

Parents and teachers described disability certification and assistive device provision as camp-driven and episodic. After sales services (repair, training, therapy) were intermittent. Teachers reported that children would cease using aids when they would break or become uncomfortable hence treated as not serious thereby blaming the families.

This trend has backfiring effects, families are paying to travel and the bureaucracy is putting pressure on them and schools tend to construct non-use as parental failure, instead of system failure. Article 24 UNCRPD focuses on access among the communities where the learners reside and thus the service channels should not add weight but instead minimize it.

- Block-level capacity limits: the weak middle in the implementation chain

Coverage pressures were characterized by block resource staff: too many schools and too little time and conflicting demands. In cases of block support visits, they were more inclined to check registers and ensure information was correct as opposed to guiding teachers on accommodations, peer-support routines or inclusive classroom management.

Mission guidance is the definition of BRC/CRC roles as frequent academic support and in-service training, whereas the practice in the field indicated the lack of correspondence between official requirement and practical ability. This weak middle is critical: when the block level cannot translate rights into school-facing support, responsibility shifts downward to teachers without tools.

- Capacity constraints: dignity depends on infrastructure, training, and specialist support

Physical accessibility: barriers that normalize exclusion

Audits documented recurring barriers: missing or steep ramps, inaccessible toilets, narrow entryways, and crowded classrooms. In several schools, a child with mobility



limitations could attend only when carried or assisted, making participation dependent on informal arrangements. Where toilets were inaccessible, children reduced water intake or left early.

These barriers translate rights into conditional access. Section 16 duties and related measures in the RPwD Act presume barrier removal and reasonable accommodation. Yet rural capacity conditions make exclusion appear normal, shifting inclusion from entitlement to exception.

#### **Specialist support scarcity: teachers left to improvise**

Teachers reported difficulty supporting children with sensory impairments, communication difficulties, or learning disabilities without specialist guidance. In areas where they existed, resource teachers or special educators gave no lasting classroom-based support as they were shared over a broad location. Schools felt intermittent support as stated by officials supporting scheme provisions.

According to Samagra Shiksha guidance, national-level financial assistance is given to resource teachers/special educators and provisions on inclusive education. Implementation gap in this case is not just allocation of resources, but deployment and sustenance: unless teachers have ongoing support, teachers resort to personal conviction, trial and error, and routines.

#### **Quality of training: lack of pedagogic ability in legal awareness.**

The teachers were said to receive training in a short, generic and definition and category driven manner, as opposed to classroom practice. Educators asked to be provided with viable techniques on multigrade classes: differentiated assignments, alternative assessment, peer-support activities, and behavior management without humiliation.

Training, which is evaluated through the lens of dignity, is not merely a form of skill building; rather, it is an engine to the extent that it defines how teachers perceive a child as something capable of learning or a heavy load. When training does not build capability, rights become moral pressure without professional tools, increasing the likelihood of exclusionary discretion.

#### **Multigrade constraints: structural pressures that drive rationing**

In multigrade settings, teachers manage multiple curricula simultaneously. Pressed for time, teachers admitted to focusing only on those they felt would pass the tests. When children needed more support, they were sometimes given simpler work to keep them quiet, resulting in "presence without participation". This is not a question of teacher bias; it is the direct result of an ecosystem of structural scarcity.

- **The role of teacher- and school-level discretion: when dignity is enacted or withheld**

Discretion that produces dignity: adaptive inclusion in adverse resource settings

At some schools, inclusion was sold as a professional and moral duty by head teachers.

- **Teachers used low-cost strategies:**

- flexible seating to improve access and attention
- peer buddy routines
- oral questioning and extra time
- simplified instructions with repeated scaffolding



- parent engagement to reduce absenteeism and stigma

These practices did not require advanced devices; they required a dignity-oriented school culture and leadership support. This corroborates street-level bureaucracy findings that, when institutional norms reward inclusion rather than punish it, discretion can be enabling.

- The exercise of dignity-denying discretion: label, lowered expectation, informal exclusion

Other labels in other schools only recognized the child for their disability, or saw them as incapable. Common patterns included:

- putting a child at the back of the bus or near the door "to not disturb"
- Child exclusion from recitation, sports or assembly roles
- not to attend during exams or inspections
- describing accommodation as a "special favor" instead of a right

These practices turn equality into its mere husk, and this is what Ambedkar cautioned against. The child is technically enrolled but socially and pedagogically excluded.

#### **Intersectional marginalization: disability with caste, poverty, and gender**

Parents described how disability-related stigma interacted with poverty and social hierarchy. Some families felt uncomfortable approaching teachers or officials, anticipating blame or humiliation. Girls with disabilities were described as more likely to be kept at home due to safety concerns, household labor expectations, and heightened stigma.

This finding matters because dignity is relational. Inclusive education can not be framed as a brace position of a 'narrow winding pass' of disability program; rather, it needs to deal with multiple marginalization embedded in rural schooling life.

## **VI. Discussion**

This study argues that inclusive education in rural India is an experiment for testing psychology of Ambedkar constitutional morality. Rights are identified in law, but dignity is created through policy arrangements. The pattern empirically is straightforward: governance rules are compliance-oriented, capacity is weak and discretion fills the void. Combine the discretion with inclusive norms and modest resources, and dignity proliferates. Where discretion is formed by a lack of resources, social shame, and the imperative to perform, dignity shrivels further into unrecorded exclusion.

Ambedkar's focus on social democracy and the inextricability of liberty, equality and fraternity also offers a strong interpretative lens. Even in a school with progressive policies, routine humiliation due to exclusion is Exactly the sort of contradiction between political democracy and social reality his writings warn us about.

The legislative-policy architecture (RPwD Act and UNCRPD) lays down the normative threshold: Nondiscrimination, reasonable accommodation, and full access. The way in which the implementation system works also converts rights into quantifiable sight lines. This is a dignity deficit: victory is defined by forms and registration rather than inclusion, education, recognition for participation.



A dignity-enhancing implementation lens thus demands moving beyond the assessment of inclusive education as to whether "we are compliant?" to "Are we supporting full participation and dignity?" This links harmoniously with the theme of inclusive systems and community-based access given precedence by Article 24, and reflects Ambedkar's dictum that 'constitutional injunctions cannot be worked' on merely its declaration.

## VII. Policy Implications and Recommendations

### **District-level reforms: from reporting to problem-solving**

1. Revamp surveillance to be dignified. Include qualitative indicators: participation, peer relations, accommodation practices and complaint handling, not just registers.
2. Turn convergence into normal service channels. Substitute campus-based and related strategies with the foreseeable referral, follow-up, and follow-up strategies that are consistent with community-based access in Article 24.
3. Create a district inclusion cell that has distinct responsibility. Explain who makes which jobs: certification linkage, accessibility upgrades, teacher mentoring and grievance response.

### **Strengthening block-level: the missing middle.**

1. Develop block-level capability of school embedded support. The personnel of the blocks should have time, transportation, and manageable load of school to accomplish coaching, not only, inspection.
2. Teacher development based on practice. Replace lecture-based training with demonstration lessons, co-teaching support and feedback, based on multigrade inclusion.
3. Output data into support planning. Simple plans of school-level school support utilization and tracking whether accommodations are being provided using lists of identified children.

A formal guideline on the use of block and cluster academic support structures is offered by mission guidance, which must be implemented with the provision of resources and defined roles.

### **School-level dignity practices: making constitutional morality visible**

#### **1. School inclusion charter**

A modest charter for rights in the form of nonhumiliation, nonexclusion and accommodation can translate into a change of school culture.

#### **2. Peer fraternity routines**

Although specific processes and mechanisms vary between schools, buddy systems, assembly roles for everyone and anti-bullying norms are ways in which fraternity as school life is put into practice.

#### **3. Accommodation as entitlement**

Explicitly position extra time, alternative assessment and seating arrangements as rights not teacher favors.

### **System alignment: connect schemes to dignity outcomes**

Samagra Shiksha's provisions for inclusive education should be monitored not just in terms of spending and coverage, but whether resource teacher support and aids are actually leading to participation and learning.



## VIII. Contribution to Knowledge

### This study contributes by:

1. Linking Ambedkar's vision of the constitution with empirical analysis on Inclusive Education Implementation.
2. Positioning inclusive education as a project of dignity building, not merely administrative or pedagogic project.
3. Showing how compliance displacement works a dignity gap into rural education.
4. Offering an integrated GOV-CAP-DISK explanation for divergent inclusion outcomes.
5. Providing a set of dignity-based implementation lens to inform monitoring and policy-making.

## IX. Limitations of the Study

1. One-district case study design restricts the statistical generalization, but the mechanisms can be applied to similar rural context.
2. The emphasis is on depth, with learning outcome measures and longitudinal tracking for future work.
3. Counter-narrative cross-sections from across caste on gender are informed by participant reports and brief windows of observation; further ethnographic investigation would help to deepen causal explanation.

## X. Conclusion

The constitutional vision of Ambedkar requires that dignity and equality should not be only enshrined in a law but they should be practiced in institutions. In rural inclusive education, the rights are based on paper with the RPwD Act and the UNCRPD, but the day-to-day inclusion relies on the coordination of governance, the capacity building, and the discretion on the street level. It explores how the rights fulfilment within the governance framework is guided by compliance-based heavy governance and constant capacity crunch, where the rights fulfilment power and pressure lie on the teachers and head teachers, creating the non-uniformity in the consequences of dignity between adaptive inclusion and informal exclusion. An implementation that is guided by dignity can reconcile both the legal requirements and practice by revifting monitoring, enhancing block-level support and routinizing convergence services and establishing school cultures in which fraternity and accommodation become established as the everyday practice.

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